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MARSHDIKES

BY HELEN ASHTON

NEW YORK
BRENTANO'S
1917

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I

HONOURS EASY

THE four-fifteen express to Dover had already begun moving out of Charing Cross Station. Celia lay back in her corner, and reflected, "I shall be all by myself till Ashford, anyway." The idea was pleasant; she had two novels and a comfortable place, and she was travelling first-class as the final extravagance of her holiday. She prepared for the journey home with satisfaction.

The door was flung open. A suit-case fell at her feet, and its owner made his appearance with almost equal precipitancy. He relapsed into the corner by the door, and, turning towards her, showed her the face that she had not expected to see before her journey's end. She was chiefly and absurdly conscious of the fact that even his recent athletic feats had not dislodged the well-remembered eyeglass.

"So you still wear it, Francis," she remarked.

He started undisguisedly, and Celia began to laugh.

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"Come over here, and see if you remember me," she said.

He obeyed with alacrity. It had always taken much to disconcert him. "Of course I remember you," he said, searching her face meanwhile for some token of identity.

"Oh, Francis!" she reproached him humorously. "Do it better than that! You wouldn't deceive me into thinking you had the ghost of a recollection of me. Even if it wasn't five years ago."

"Five years," reflected he. "Now, how did I come to be such a fool as to neglect the acquaintance for five years?" The lifting of one eyebrow was a trick that she remembered with curious distinctness.

"Good!" she ejaculated; and when he stared, "I'm awfully glad you aren't changed," she told him impulsively. "I thought you wouldn't be, somehow; but one never can tell."

"You thought I shouldn't? . . . I detected you for a witch at once, but this is past witchcraft. How did you know you were going to meet me to-day?"

"That's my secret."

They both laughed.

"I wish I knew who you were," he said, quite frankly omitting the pretence of memory.

"I'll leave you in blissful ignorance for a time."

"You're not one of my innumerable Holland

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cousins? I've a vast family, and I've quarrelled with most of it, and been cast off by the rest."

"Oh, I've quarrelled with you in my time too. But I'm no relation of yours."

"You've quarrelled with me? I should have thought that impossible."

"Why? I've a bad temper, and so have you. That much I can remember."

"This waxes very interesting." He studied her openly. She turned to him a small, eager face, swathed about with veils of dark blue, and laughed at him. He glanced at her hands in search of rings, but she had not taken off her gloves. He was utterly bewildered. "How did you know you were going to meet me?" he asked again, leaving the greater riddle.

This time she yielded. "Michael told me you were coming down."

"Michael — Michael Dittany? Are you coming to Marshdikes?"

"Yes! Isn't it fun? Do say you're glad you came."

"'Glad,'" he returned, "is scarcely the word. Then I shall really find out from him who you are."

"Can you wait till then? Oh, Francis, how patient of you!"

"Patience has never been one of my virtues. Tell me now."

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"Say 'Please.'"

"Not I," with provoking equanimity. "You know you're dying to tell me. I leave you the pleasure."

"Brute! But that's just how you always talked in the old days. I'll have my revenge before I'm done with you."

"And meanwhile . . . the information?"

"What will you give me for it?"

"I've nothing valuable enough."

"Oh! have you developed modesty lately? It never used to be one of your virtues."

"It never is a virtue."

"Are you trying to make an epigram? Please don't. That was one of your very youthful virtues."

"Five years?" soliloquised Harland, beginning to respect his adversary. "That would make me . . . well, I won't confess," as he did the sum.

"It's not necessary. Twenty-seven."

"I said you were a witch. Now, what did I do, and where did I go, in the twenty-seventh year of my pilgrimage?"

"Think it over," commanded Celia.

. . . . . .

She watched a thin, dissatisfied face, curiously smooth and brown, with rare lines in it, but those very deep. She remembered the characteristic lifting of one eyebrow and the

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twisted humour of the mouth. He was very little changed, after all, she reflected.

She glanced up to find him studying her. Midway in the smile came recollection. "Celia was the name, I think," he remarked carelessly.

"You took leave to employ it. As far as I recollect, you said you preferred it to my surname."

"Have you altered that since?"

She did not enlighten him. "You don't often waste an opportunity, do you?" she said reflectively.

"I perceive that you are a judge of character. Were you in those days?"

"I wasn't old enough." She became transiently grave. "At twenty—or twenty-one—you don't develop these qualities."

He smiled. "I recollect a very charming little débutante . . . rather nervous, perhaps,—that was only natural,—but still with many possibilities. Is this what has become of her?"

His interest was undisguised. Celia saw it, and laughed to herself. He had always been open to any hint of challenge. She reflected that he was only a simple problem, after all. But five years ago her experience had been less. Harland, watching her, detected a flavour of mockery in her smile.

"What are you thinking about?" he demanded.

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She said, "That I must have bored you very much—five years ago."

"Why?"

"I was so very young. And you had mature tastes even then."

"Had I? My dear Celia, you evidently know too much about me. I must contradict some of your impressions, or you will begin to lose interest in me. Let me begin by assuring you that you can never have bored me—even in my days of ignorance, five years ago."

"The proper answer to that is, I suppose, 'Oh, Mr. Harland!' with a downcast look."

"The proper answer is, 'Oh, Francis!' or alternatively, 'Thank you very much.'"

"Then you accept the old terms?"

"I do indeed. As you say, I never lose an opportunity. And I am going to talk to you all this week-end, so we must be on comfortable terms."

"You take a good deal for granted."

"Some people can take anything for granted."

"And you think you're one of them? I believe I shall have to undertake your education."

"Please do. I suppose that was expected of me," with a curious look.

"It was the obvious remark. You make more of them than you used to."

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"I begin to perceive that you are a very worthy antagonist, Celia. Now that we have arranged the forms of tourney we shall be able to pass the week-end very pleasantly."

"And afterwards?"

"If you are as wise as I think you there will be no afterwards. But you are a woman, and therefore probably incapable of knowing when to stop." His face became, transiently, dead-weary and very bitter. Celia, watching it, had a moment of fear. But it passed quickly. Harland was merely, she reflected, a little more himself than she had thought.

"That might have been a quotation from five years ago," she told him.

"Did I say things like that to you five years ago?"

"Sometimes."

"That was foolish. I'm sure that you didn't understand me, however well-developed you may have been. Did you?"

"I didn't—then. It would have been a little advanced for twenty-one. But I'm older now. I think I can understand both it and you rather more clearly."

"An unwise boast. I shall have to make you retract it."

"I'm sure you'll try. You always wanted to be thought impenetrable."

"Who doesn't?"

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Thus they fenced, as the train ran through the Kentish hop-gardens.

Harland found out little about his travelling-companion, and could remember less. Certainly he had danced with her through one summer, and had found her, if he did not mistake, amusing for that space of time. Afterwards she had been succeeded by others, and, in a measure, effaced. He wondered if he had not made a mistake in forgetting her. There were certainly possibilities in her now. He returned to their game.

As they were nearing Ashford he said to her, "Do you really mean that you are coming to Marshdikes for the week-end?"

"Oh yes. Probably for longer."

"And you know the Dittanys?"

"Very well indeed."

"Then tell me about them."

"How much do you know already? I'm not going to give you stale information. You're too critical."

"I've known Michael Dittany for about ten years, on and off. We were up at Oxford together. We've seen a certain amount of each other since, without being particularly intimate. Three years ago he took unto himself a wife and a house in the country, and was lost to his friends. I met him again the other day. He wandered into my rooms and de-

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manded breakfast, as if we'd seen each other the week before."

Celia laughed. "How exactly like Michael! Was there any breakfast to be had?"

"Something was produced—I forget what. We had a very pleasant half-hour. He then commanded me to spend this week-end at Marshdikes, and meet his wife."

"And you've come."

"Not because I anticipate any pleasure from the meeting. I shall always bear Mrs. Dittany a grudge for carrying off one of my best friends. But I'm glad to renew my acquaintance with Michael."

"I see. Don't talk rashly about Mrs. Dittany. You may live to repent it."

"Good! She's attractive, then?"

"Do you expect a candid opinion from another woman? Oh, Francis, you've something yet to learn. I'll leave you to form your own opinion of Mrs. Dittany."

"In the meantime I shall reproach Michael for not telling me about you."

"I should. He warned me all right. In fact, I engineered the invitation, more or less. I wanted to see what you were like nowadays."

"That is a confession of interest on which I shall build."

"You're welcome to all your vanity can make of it, my friend."

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"You don't know yet to what my vanity is equal."

"You forget that I've a certain amount of experience to go upon."

"I wish I knew as much about you as you pretend to know about me."

"Perhaps you will before the week-end is over."

"The week-end promises to be lively . . . and pleasant. Tell me, what sort of a place is Marshdikes?"

"It's adorable." She smiled in reminiscent fashion. He said, watching her, "Then you know it well," and his remark was not a question.

"Oh yes."

"And the Dittanys?"

"Very well too. They're my best friends. Michael is an angel."

"Or an Archangel? That's his old nickname, you know."

She did not reprove him for a very obvious jest. She was thinking, it appeared, of Michael, and very pleasantly. "I believe he hasn't an enemy."

"That might be a condemnation. But I know what you mean. Michael and I have disagreed on almost every subject in the world and yet I never liked a man so well." Harland's voice was unusually gentle. Becoming

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aware of this, he turned off to remark, "Yes, I certainly bear Mrs. Dittany a grudge for robbing me of him. He'll never be the same again."

"You don't really think so?"

"I do indeed. A married man is useless to his friends. But describe the woman to me. Or no . . . you won't do it properly. Tell me instead how long you've known her."

"All my life, more or less. I get on with her quite well. She's not good enough for Michael, of course, but then . . ."

"Who would be? Very true, and I thank you for saying it. Does Mrs. Dittany realise it too? If she does, I'll begin to think about forgiving her, perhaps." It occurred to Celia that he had something the mask of a fox. The fox-red hair conformed, and the red eyebrows, tilted mockingly. His teeth, when he smiled, were sharp and pointed, his golden-brown eyes inquiring and sullen by turns. They were bright now with something like interest. "Does Michael's wife appreciate him?" he demanded.

"I expect she does," laughed Celia.

He nodded his approval. "And so do you," he continued discerningly.

She coloured. "I ought to. I owe him absolutely everything."

"Ah! . . . Well, I've had reason to be

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grateful to him myself. In my time. You might call him something of a soul-physician—if you believe in souls. I haven't troubled his ministrations lately, though. That's Mrs. Dittany's fault, for taking him away. Perhaps a course of him would set me up again. I need some sort of a prescription, Heaven knows." He stared out at the flying country, and forgot Celia for a moment. When he looked up again, she was watching him keenly.

"That's the first true thing you've said to me," she remarked.

He adopted his former manner. "I will try to make it the last. Truth is a very overrated thing. And I never tell anyone the truth about myself. It would be so . . ."

"Compromising?" as he paused for the word.

"No. Uninteresting."

"There's something in your theory. A solved riddle is easily forgotten. Was that my mistake—five years ago? I've sometimes wanted to know—purely as a matter of experience." Her glance questioned.

"Leave the riddle unsolved," advised Harland imperturbably.

She acknowledged defeat with a laugh, as the train began to slow down for Ashford Station.

"But you never married, did you?" she inquired, standing up to collect her belongings.

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"Of course not," replied Harland. "I waited for you."

She shook her head. "Oh, Francis, you were more wary in the old days. I might, if I were so minded, construe that very awkwardly for you."

"As a definite proposal? It was so intended." He also had risen, and stood looking down at her. The movement of the train flung her against him, and he steadied her with one hand to her elbow. She began to laugh.

"I'm almost tempted to accept, just for the sight of your face when I did it."

"Adopt any motive you like, so long as your decision is satisfactory."

"Oh! it shall be satisfactory, I promise you."

"Then . . . will you?"

"Francis dear, I would indeed, but for one trifling fact."

"Which is?"

"That I didn't wait. You see, I'm Mrs. Dittany."

Harland responded calmly, "I detected that as soon as you began to talk about Michael. So it was quite safe to ask you."

The train drew up at Ashford. Harland went to the door, and turning, suggested, "Honours easy?" with a smile that proved irresistible.

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"I'll take it out of you later," promised Celia. "Remember, I'm your hostess for the week-end. And I've got Letty Underhill down to help me."

"Have you indeed?" replied Francis Harland. "Then I shall expiate all my sins."

"Except the unforgivable one." She followed him to the door.

"Which is?" He was standing on the platform, and he put up a hand to aid her descent.

"The fact that you're five years late," replied Celia Dittany, and jumped down by herself.

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II

THE FAIRY HOUSE

In the local train Harland said, "Did I hear mention of my little friend Letty Underhill?"

"You did indeed. She's staying with us just now. I had her down to amuse Michael while I had my holidays. Somebody has to keep the servants off him, or there wouldn't be any more plays. Letty's the best person there is, next to me."

"I never can remember that she's his half-sister."

"I always think she's so like him."

"As clear-minded, but much more uncompromising. And she's got a taste for rescue-work that Michael wouldn't permit himself. She even tries to reform me."

"I'll warn her that it's impossible."

"It would be fatal, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps. You know too much about women, Francis. I'll tell her you're mild to a fault, shall I?"

"It would be much more fatal . . . to me

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and my attractions. You are evidently a diplomatist, Celia."

"Don't let's talk nonsense now," she answered. "You've forgotten, or haven't been told, that I've been away for a whole month." She let down the window, and turned her face to the cool and perfect air from the sea. The train was loitering through the flat country. The marshes were still full of sheep, though the month was September, and the evening was warm and golden.

"This country is next door to heaven," said Celia Dittany. "I don't know why I ever leave it."

"Yet the Celia I knew used to say that she would never leave London," reflected Harland.

"Did I? That was before Michael, you see," as if it were an answer to every question.

Harland, in whose brain the remembrance of her as she had been was growing more clear, smiled half cynically. And yet, he reflected, the reason might, after all, be sufficient. Michael was a dangerous fellow, and had converted the most unlikely people. He, Harland, was an example, or might have been, but for the intervention of a certain Celia Dittany. She had diverted Michael's attention five years ago. Harland thought that it would be a relief if she still occupied it. He was not

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prepared to give Michael a free hand with what remained of his soul nowadays. . . .

The train came to a standstill. "Appledore," said Celia, interrupting Harland's meditations. "And I told Michael to send the car over for us and the groceries. . . . Housekeeping here is enough to turn one's hair grey," in parenthesis.

They emerged from the station into a country road. A flock of sheep had just gone by, and the dust of their passing hung in the air. The sunset light turned it to a golden cloud. Overhead the sky was deep and beautiful. The hills lay far withdrawn; the village, on a nearer slope, was a cluster of red roofs under a church tower. Seaward, the marshes were limitless, crossed here and there by a line of willows above an unseen dike. Very far down against the horizon was a little town, pyramidal and solitary, towards which the train had departed.

"That's Rye," said Celia, pointing. "It's the oldest-feeling place I ever was in. You shall go there to-morrow, and be shown sights. Marshdikes is under that hill." She indicated the headland that terminated the inland country. The bluff jutted out into the marsh, and two Lombardy poplars stood at its foot. "They're in our field," said Celia. "I sometimes think we ought to rechristen the house, and bring

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them in. You can see them for miles round. Oh! there's the car. I'll drive, I think. Jimmy might make you nervous."

The bucolic youth in question settled himself at the back of the car, among the luggage; Celia Dittany and Harland went in front. The road offered itself, perfectly straight, with willows on either side, for miles. Mrs. Dittany drove well. The journey was over before Harland had expected.

"This is Marshdikes," said Celia.

He beheld a farmhouse, red and golden under its hillside. The two poplars were beyond it, and the grey-green levels of the marsh; a milestone called it four miles yet to the city on the hill that he had seen. The place was perfectly quiet, and very beautiful. Harland thought, "No wonder she is happy here. This is what Michael has given her. She chose wisely."

Then Michael himself came out of the white gate. He was as he had always been, pale, black-haired, dishevelled, of an incredible melancholy and wildest humour blended.

"Don't try and drive in at the gate, Celia darling," he begged. "You know what happened last time."

And Celia, jumping from the car, cried, "Oh, Michael, it all looks so nice when you come back to it! And we travelled down together; and Francis wishes I'd married him instead of

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you, now that he's seen me grown-up. Don't you, Francis? Oh! and where's Letty?" She was like a child home for the holidays. "Why did I ever go away?" she cried, looking at her home. "Come and be shown round, Francis."

And Michael, advancing leisurely, remarked, "He'd have made a bad bargain, wouldn't he? . . . Come in, Francis. You mustn't mind Celia at all."

Harland did not mind her. He thought that she was rather to be envied. He could not, himself, have been so glad to come to any place. To him all places were very much alike nowadays. But Celia's house suited her. It was delightful, and foolish, and strange. He felt, in a way, unworthy to come into the shadow of it, and wondered fancifully, as he looked up at it, whether it would not, by some unmistakable sign, cast him out.

But nothing happened. The shadow lay quiet on road and garden, and Celia Dittany put her hand on his arm in absolute friendship. "Come in, Francis," she bade him. "Michael, when's dinner? I didn't get any tea worth remembering."

Then Letty Underhill came through the garden door. She was very little like her half-brother, but she had his grey eyes, clear as sea-water, under heavy black brows, and her smile was as sweet as his. She greeted Har-

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land in friendly fashion. They knew each other well, and agreed on every subject save one.

"What's been done to my flower-garden?" Celia, on in front, was demanding of her husband. "How are the Michaelmas daisies? Fancy missing a whole fortnight of them!"

And Michael, "If you hadn't, it would have been the dahlias."

"I suppose it would. Oh dear! life isn't long enough for all the nice things there are in it!"

Harland remembered, with sudden and startling distinctness, that long ago, at a dance, she had said to him, "I've never yet found anything worth doing. I'm tired of life, it's so dull." He reflected, "Michael's even cleverer than I thought. How has he done it?" and stared at his host. But the explanation was not to be learned from a scrutiny, however careful. Michael walked on the turf of his garden, and said nothing more unusual than:

"I'm afraid the beds want weeding. But you can see to all that now you're back."

And Celia, lifting her face to the sunset, replied, "We'll have a jolly autumn, won't we?"

Their voices sounded very beautiful between the walls of the garden; they laughed together as if they shared a secret.

Harland, walking with Letty Underhill, asked

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her suddenly, "Why did you never tell me what this place was like?"

She turned her dark, earnest face towards him, and replied, "You wouldn't have understood. No one could who hadn't been here."

"I believe you're right," he admitted. "You've got into rather a habit of it lately, though. Please don't, Letty. A mere mortal finds it so hard to live up to."

Somewhat to his surprise Letty laughed, and was not vexed. In London he had never suspected her of a sense of humour. Solemnity was her great fault in his eyes. Could it be, he wondered apprehensively, that she too had fallen under the spell of Michael's house? In that case she would not be so easy to deal with.

"It's a nice place, isn't it?" murmured Letty gently, looking about her.

They were walking through the garden at the side of the house. The purple daisies that Celia loved were massed by the walls. There were no paths, and the turf underfoot was close-cropped and wet with dew. In the centre of the square was a mulberry tree, and there were chairs in the shadow of it.

"Doesn't the mulberry tree look friendly?" cried Celia. "But oh, Michael, it's time we put down the sacks on the grass underneath. We shall lose all the fruit."

And Michael replied:

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"You'll always be greedy, Celia. There's a whole orchard full of apples. Isn't that enough for you?"

Celia, unabashed, returned, "We'll roast some after dinner at the hall fire. You mustn't sit out to-night. There's a fog coming up from the marshes."

Harland, turning as Michael protested, saw how the dikes had each their crown of fever-mist already. The trees rose out of it like spectres, it covered the lower fields as water does. Somehow the thing disturbed Harland. For the moment he saw Marshdikes beleaguered by a white army, bent on the overthrow of its happiness. But the moment passed. They had come to the gate, and Michael's hand was on his guest's arm.

"This door's always open to you. Come in, and don't let it be for the last time." His voice was very friendly.

They went in.

The house contained, on the ground floor, one room only of importance. You went down into it by three steps. It was long, low-roofed, and very spacious, with windows at each end. These were red-curtained, as Celia explained, "to make it look jolly when we come home at night in the winter." There was an open hearth, that had been in the farm-kitchen. The flat divan before it could, and often did,

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accommodate at least three people in various attitudes of comfort. There was a table by the seaward window, where meals were spread, and three of the four walls carried shelves full of books. Harland thought, "If I had not known who lived here I should have guessed it was Michael."

Letty said, "I've left the flowers for you, Celia. I thought you'd want your own."

Harland had already detected the one thing wanting, but he did not dislike Letty's reticence. He thought that he could guess where the tastes of the two women differed. Letty's flowers would not suit her brother's house. Clove carnations, stiff and aromatic, were what he had always given her. But Celia's Michaelmas daisies would be perfect against these white walls.

"Wasn't I right not to describe this place?" said Letty at his shoulder.

He nodded. "I see what you meant now," he returned. "It wouldn't have done . . . in London."

But this was beyond Letty. She stared in troubled bewilderment, as she always did when you left her outside an allusion, and made some commonplace remark. (It was as if she said, pathetically, "What do you want from me? I don't know . . . Is it this? . . .")

"There's nothing else to show you here,"

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said Celia Dittany's happy voice. "We do everything in here, except our work. Michael can show you his den if he likes. I'm not sure if you're worthy of mine. We'll see when I know you better."

"I thought you knew me too well already. Where is this sanctum, and what work can Celia have to do in it?" He was amused by her pretensions.

"Oh! I belong to Michael's profession too. You wouldn't know, of course. It's all come about since your day. It's really rather a blessing. He turns out his plays in one room, and I write my stories in another. We don't interrupt each other. It's a solemn vow, you see, that we won't either of us go into the other one's den unless we're asked. . . . They're upstairs in the roof. I've not been into Michael's at all since we took the house. Have I, Michael? And he only invaded me once, because I asked him to hang a picture."

Harland began to laugh whole-heartedly, for the first time since Celia had met him again.

"You see," Michael took up the account, "we both find the peculiar damnableness of being married is that you can't be alone when you like. So we both made up our minds to be more sensible than the rest of the world. . . . It's a great plan. You should try it when your own time comes."

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Harland did not smile at that joke. There came into his mind, like a darting snake, the idea that these people wanted him to marry Letty Underhill. He would not allow his face to change. "I thought that two of a trade . . ." he began.

"But why shouldn't we disagree?" came from Celia. "Of course we do, about nearly everything. That's just the point. It's so much more amusing." She had her hand on Michael's shoulder, for she was almost as tall as he; and, "We both quarrel rather well," said she. "It's our only social virtue, so we're proud of it."

"I hope you'll exercise it on me," returned Harland, with a laugh.

They took him up the narrow stairway to a room that reminded him of his own youth. It was small and odd-fashioned, and had a sloping roof. He could remember rooms like it in a farmhouse where he had stayed as a boy. He opened the window and looked out. The garden was below, with all its flowers hidden by the darkness. Beyond were the levels of the marsh, drowned in a low-lying fog, and out at sea was the blink of a light-ship. The country was very quiet. Harland thought that it listened and whispered about the house, as if it would break in on the contentment dwelling there. He drew back and shut the window, as

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if he shut out something that threatened. Within there was candle-light and a small wood fire. He returned to everyday life with a start, and told himself that weariness had made him fanciful.

As he dressed he thought of Michael, as of a man long dead. He had hoped something from this meeting. Once he had loved Michael, and trusted him; and he had meant to build their friendship up again. But what would be the use? Michael had settled himself —had found a woman to love, work to do, and a house to live in. How could you be intimate with a man who had done all this without your help? You would fail him just where his deepest recollections began.

"It's no use," thought Francis Harland. "I ought not to have come. Michael's outgrown me, after all."

He had for contrast a picture of himself that did not please him. He was idle and lonely, he had no interest in any living creature but himself. Men he distrusted, of women he was learning to tire. Letty Underhill had tried to make him love her, and had failed. Now, like Celia Dittany when first he knew her, he could find nothing worth doing, and his life wearied him.

"What's their secret here?" he wondered. "Everything matters to them, and nothing

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hurts. They're like two children together." His own thoughts angered him.

"Michael couldn't change me now," he thought. "I'm too far gone, even for him. And . . . I doubt if he'd undertake me. He's too busy." There was regret here, perhaps; certainly a little contempt. Celia Dittany was well enough, but shallow; in her own phrase, no one could be good enough for Michael. Yet she had sweet eyes. . . .

He heard her now, in the passage that ran the length of the first floor between the bedrooms. She whistled a few notes, as if she were a schoolboy giving a signal; and then, "Michael . . ." she called softly. A door opened and shut; Michael's voice came, deeper and less easy to follow; their steps died away along the passage. Harland, in a moment of fancy, saw the two of them arm in arm, as they had been in their garden. He was abruptly, furiously jealous of Michael's content; he hated Celia Dittany, because she was young and happy, and loved all the world. No wonder Michael had forgotten easily! . . .

And yet he knew that he was wrong. Michael had not forgotten, would never forget. He was only biding his time. You could not escape him. Sooner or later he turned and looked at you. Then you left everything and

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went after him. You could not help yourself; he was Michael. . . .

"What am I thinking about?" said Harland, and blew out his candle with violence. He stood a moment in the dark, then felt his way to where the line of light showed round the door.

In the house-place the three who were of one family waited for him. Celia was beautiful in a satin gown; she smiled at Harland, and he was afraid of her, because he foresaw that in a little while she must needs conquer him. That was written in Letty's grave regard, and in the black-browed serenity of Michael, who appeared well-pleased at something.

"We're so hungry," cried Celia, "that if we'd known you at all well we shouldn't have waited for you."

And they dined at the round table in the window. There was nothing remarkable about the very excellent dinner ordered by Letty, except the fact that Michael scrupulously observed his Friday's fast. Harland remembered this as a former habit of his, and was surprised that he remembered it.

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III

AFTER DINNER

WHEN dinner had been cleared away, they went back to the open hearth. Michael lay full stretch on the divan, with his sister beside him, sharing a box of cigarettes. Harland, as guest, had an elaborate cane chair that would adopt any angle conceivable. And Celia Dittany, with a plate of apples beside her, knelt before the fire, intent on roasting them at the end of a string.

"You can't do it that way," declared Michael, waving his cigarette in illustrative fashion, until he was surrounded by a cloud of smoke. "Let me show you."

But his wife was obdurate. "Do let a man alone, Michael! I don't care if it is burning. It's like your trying to look out a train in Bradshaw for me, or undo parcel string. I'd rather do it wrong for myself."

Harland smoked, and listened appreciatively. It appeared that this was an example of the agreement described. Both parties were certainly enjoying it. They sought out the most unvarnished expressions for each

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other, and were absolutely good-tempered throughout. Harland observed that Michael made no attempt to move from his recumbent position. The apple, moreover, twisted and dripped to perfection, and was finally eaten with great approval. Harland then came to the conclusion that the whole was an elaborate and delightful joke between the two, arising out of the high spirits caused by their reunion. They played at quarrelling because they were so glad to see each other again.

"Why did you need to take a holiday?" he demanded of his hostess, so abruptly that Letty jumped. But her brother and his wife only laughed.

Celia said softly, "You're beginning to understand, Francis." And Michael remarked, "She likes her evening out, with the other servants."

Even Letty's grave face relaxed. Celia knelt opposite to Harland, and explained. "I don't know that I wanted one this time, really. But we both take them on principle, every now and then. So as not to get bored."

"You admit the possibility?" Harland was attracted by her attitudes, which were those of a schoolgirl—graceful, awkward, and untrained. Her upturned face was very vivid; she made Letty look dull beside her.

"Why not? I'm sure Michael couldn't

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stand me for a year on end, and I shouldn't want to put up with him for so long either. We should hate each other."

Michael smiled.

"And are the holidays independent?" inquired Harland. "They must be, I suppose, or you would never look back on them with such satisfaction."

Celia accepted his cynicism with delightful innocence. "Of course. We should never want to do the same things. Even if we chose the same place. I always go to London, and shop. You should see the frocks I bought this time! Well, I expect you will. I shan't be able to resist wearing them. Such a green brocade, Letty, for the next time the locals come to dinner!" She waved her hands expressively.

"You'll astonish the natives," observed Michael. "They've never quite got over the nasturtium frock." An allusion here that evidently pleased him. Harland wished that he himself were familiar with its details. He would have liked to have seen Celia Dittany in orange and flame-colour.

"And Michael's holidays?" he inquired.

"Oh! he fishes . . . or slums . . . or helps somebody fight an election. Those were the last three—weren't they, Michael? Anything, so long as it's change . . . and copy . . ." teasingly.

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"It was an accident last time, you know it was." Michael defended himself eagerly.

"He came back," explained Celia, "absolutely crocked up. And then he wrote *Top Dog* straight away on top of it. And then *I* had to nurse him." She pretended to be annoyed.

Harland had seen the play in question during its long run. Most people considered it Dittany's masterpiece as yet. It dealt with modern politics. Harland himself had found it disturbingly good. He said so now. "That play—I always wondered how you got the idea. It worried me." He spoke to Michael as if they were alone. He was laughing, but shamefaced. Michael turned his head and replied without emotion, "Of course. It's what you should be doing yourself."

Harland professed to be amused. "Of all the things I couldn't stand . . . My good Michael, you've forgotten me. Do I look like an enthusiast?"

"I've seen worse imitations," his host replied.

Celia watched the two with bright eyes. Harland turned to her, covering his feelings. "Why didn't your enthusiastic husband make holiday when you did?—Forgive my eternal questions. I should like to work out the theory of this household."

Celia nodded in friendly fashion. "He

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ought to have, but he wouldn't leave the new play." They talked over Michael's head; he smoked absently meanwhile.

"Then there *is* another on the stocks. I wondered. What's the subject this time?"

Celia laughed, spreading out her hands. "How should I know? Ask Michael." And, as Harland stared, "I told you we worked separately."

"You could hardly expect me to believe it."

"But it's quite true."

Harland began to laugh. "How magnificent! This is the most perfect household I ever was in. Celia, do you seriously maintain that you have always resisted the temptation to ask questions? Your sex should disown you. Now I see why Michael is one of our leading dramatists."

"I'll remember that against you," with a pretence of wounded vanity that laughter overcame. "Oh, I was hopeless at first," she admitted. "I used to insist on reading what he'd done and offering suggestions. Then he paid me back over the novel I was on, and I saw what it was like. I reformed before we settled down here. That's why we have separate workrooms. And we scarcely ever see each other's work till after it's published. You won't understand, I expect. But nothing puts one off like an outside suggestion in the middle of

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things. Because no two people ever treat a subject in the same way."

"Of course not. I've been a critic in my own time, remember."

"So you have. That's all right, then; and you understand our madness." Her smile admitted him to a secret; Harland found himself returning it unawares.

"So Michael has evaded all interviewers," he said, reverting quickly to the play.

Michael sent up a ring of smoke. "It's only a fairy-tale I'm writing to please myself. No one'll ever want to act it. *Harlequin Married*, I call it. It's nearly done. I'll take my holiday when it's finished."

"What shall you do this time?"

"Help get another man into Parliament, most likely." The face was dark and melancholy, but the eyes twinkled.

"Who's to be the victim this time?" inquired Harland suspiciously.

Michael made no reply. He lay looking into the fire for a moment, then put his hand into the box at his side, and groped for another cigarette. "Play to us, Letty," he suggested, turning to light it.

Letty got up obediently. The piano was just behind her. "What will you have?" she inquired, sorting the endless music-books on the shelf beside it.

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Harland, who knew her playing of old, petitioned for a favourite nocturne, and Celia obtained part of the Casse-Noisette suite. Letty would play by the hour when encouraged. She went from one melody to another, and her listeners applauded and criticised eagerly. Later, they deserted the classics, and sang in chorus. Michael disinterred folk-songs, and certain German *Studenten-lieder*, in which Harland was encored.

"Try the Latin ones," said Michael.

Harland turned back a page, and played a melody over Letty's shoulder. He sang softly, "Gaudeamus igitur, juvenes dum sumus." "That do you, Michael?" he inquired, looking round. Letty continued to try over the third line, going back to correct a mistake. "Post jucundam juventutem——"

But Celia, sitting now by Michael on the cushions, said quickly, "Oh, don't! I hate it . . . I can't bear it." She shivered as if she were afraid, and said, laughing unsteadily, "You do choose such gloomy ones, you know."

Harland could not understand why she was so troubled, and Letty's music ended abruptly.

Michael laughed at his wife with great gentleness. "This comes of your being taught Latin. Choose another for yourself."

She stared down at him for a moment where

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he lay, then recovered herself. "Go on, Francis," she said. "It's all right."

Harland went back to the piano, bewildered. "We'll find something else," he said nevertheless. And he turned the pages of the book until he came to "Passing By."

"Let's hear you sing that?" said Letty, when he would have gone further. Harland glanced at her, but she was looking straight at the page before her, and he thought that he must have been deceived as to the significance of her tone.

"It's a dear old thing," assented Celia quickly. "Though it's horribly inappropriate to you. Let's hear what you can make of it." She challenged him mischievously, to all appearances herself again.

"I take your challenge," Harland answered. "No one can be more serious than myself when I try. Listen."

He sang with the voice of absolute devotion and faithfulness:

> "Cupid is winged and doth range;
> Her countries so my love doth change.
> But change the earth or change the sky,
> Yet will I love her till I die."

Letty's accompaniment ended quietly. She sat with her hands on the keys and spoke no word. Harland, turning to Michael's wife, said, "I flatter myself I sang that

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rather well. It's an easy matter to assume devotion."

Celia stood up.

"You're a good actor, Francis," she said. "Do you ever deceive yourself?"

"Fortunately, that has always proved impossible," Harland returned, and bade her good-night. He closed the door on her and Letty, and forgot them both. As he returned to the hearth his only thought was, "Now comes Michael. What will he say to me?" He was afraid of Michael.

But Michael did not attack that evening. He pushed over the cigarettes; said, "Now let's hear your news," and embarked on reminiscences of their mutual youth. He seemed already to know everything that was essential about Harland's doings in the last three years. Harland wondered how he did it, then wonder gave place to enjoyment. Michael had not changed after all. The three years might never have been, and Celia Dittany's name was not mentioned once. The evening differed in no particular from any one that could be remembered in the old days. It did not end till one o'clock in the morning.

Then said Harland, rising from before a dying fire, "So now you know all about me."

Michael nodded gravely. His silence

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pricked Harland to further speech. "What are you planning to do with me, you madman?" He stared at the whimsical, melancholy face. "You've something in your mind," he accused Michael.

Michael only laughed. "You've a guilty conscience. What should I be doing to you?"

"Why did you ask me down?"

"For the pleasure of your company."

Harland got nothing more out of him that evening.

Next day they motored out by Rye and Pevensey, lunching at Lewes and returning in the afternoon through the hill-country, by way of Northiam and Ebony. There was tea on the lawn under the mulberry tree, whose fruit, dropping, stained the ground like blood. Then Michael and Celia went off to inspect their flower-beds, and Harland prepared for an inevitable conversation with Letty Underhill. He would have escaped it if he could, knowing that she expected what he could not give her. But he could do nothing save fence lightly, and leave her to draw her own conclusions. He chose a non-committal subject. "How's your work, Letty? If one may mention politics in a garden."

She turned her head. "It's a long time since you came to hear anything about it, Francis." Her voice appealed for kindness,

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and he sighed. "You play your cards so badly, Letty," he thought, standing apart from the situation, as was his wont, and criticising it. Letty tired him nowadays. Yet he had hoped for self-forgetfulness from her once, and still pitied her. He wished that she could have forgotten more easily, or he himself have remembered a little longer.

He said, "I'm defenceless, and you know it. The first woman I ever broke an appointment with said to me afterwards, 'You could have come if you'd wanted.' She was extraordinarily clever. I don't trouble about excuses now. It's better for people to find me out at once."

Letty replied, "I found you out a long time ago. I wish it had made any difference—I wonder where the girl is now who'll have Letty Underhill quoted to her in a year's time?"

Harland said, "'Sufficient unto the day——' You look very far ahead, Letty. Do women always try to make things harder for themselves in that way? It seems unwise."

"We're not distinguished for logic, are we?"

"Who knows, nowadays? I'm told there are establishments where that and every science may be acquired. I wish you had learnt a little at your school." His voice was not unkindly.

"It might have made things easier, perhaps—for you," she returned.

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"I wasn't—for once—thinking of myself."

"I'll note the occasion down, then." Letty was bitter because she was hurt. Harland knew it. Yet he would probably be forced to hurt her more deeply before their acquaintance ended.

There was a little pause. The girl lay back in her chair, staring into the branches above her. Harland turned on his side, and began pulling up the small clover-blossoms out of the turf. The shadows were quiet on the grass, the air was very soft and cool. It was about sunset-time.

"I wonder," reflected Letty then aloud, "why you're a failure. You've all the qualities of a successful man."

"I've often thought so myself," interrupted Harland, smiling regretfully under his fox-red moustache.

The girl pursued her own thoughts. "You're absolutely hard—you never forget yourself—and you don't care for anyone else in the world. I can't see why you've done so little."

Harland did not complain of her judgment. He merely said, very gently, "I've spent some time in trying to convince you of my character. You seem to understand it at last. Can't you manage to draw the very obvious conclusion?"

She would not look at him. He watched

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the shadows under her down-dropped lashes. "That I'm scarcely worth knowing, Letty dear; and certainly not worth troubling about. I'm grateful to you for trying to reform me, but I'd rather see you better employed. A great many people will tell you that Francis Harland isn't worth while—and no one more heartily than myself."

She said, "I believe you mean that," and glanced down at him.

"You have been privileged," he returned, "to behold me serious for the first—and, I hope, the last—time in a farcical career."

"You hurt me so when you talk like that."

"I have hurt a good many people in my time. Few of them deserved it less than you. There may be a little satisfaction for the more vindictive among them in the knowledge that I too have suffered."

"I wish," said Letty Underhill, with sudden fierceness, "that I could make you miserable."

"You can only do that," he told her, "by continuing to think well of me." He would not see the look she gave him.

And then Michael and Celia came into the walled garden again, and it was necessary to talk to them. Harland wondered how much they knew or guessed. It was impossible to tell.

They went into the house before the mists

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rose. Harland avoided direct talk with Michael, unnecessarily, as it proved, for Michael made no attempt to speak alone with him. Celia bore the brunt of the situation, if there was one. She was a clever hostess and a good talker. The evening was a quiet one. Letty sat down to the piano directly after dinner, and played sorrowful music and angry by turns. Harland understood that she was trying to speak to him; but, as before, there was no answer that he could give. He closed his ears to the music, and would not show that he heard it.

After the two girls had left them, he and Michael spent another long evening together. They spoke of many things, renewing their friendship. But still Michael spoke no word, good or bad, to enlighten that which Harland found mysterious in him. And the secret of the fairy house remained inviolate.

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IV

GREEN APPLES

On Sunday morning Harland, descending to a very late breakfast, found himself alone with his hostess.

"The others have gone into Rye to church," said she. "I knew you'd want to be lazy, so I stayed to keep you company."

"You divine all my wishes," he answered. "Establish me in a comfortable chair, and I will talk, if you like. But expect nothing more strenuous from me."

"We'll go," said Celia, "to the orchard." And after breakfast they went there, and sat in the sun. It was a perfect autumn day, blue and red and gold, like a missal, and there was no wind. The orchard was on a hillside behind the farm; it lay very sheltered. Celia swung in a hammock, her lap full of the red apples she had gathered up; she nibbled at them with her strong white teeth. Harland stretched himself on the rug at her feet. "Now talk," she commanded.

"What about?" He wondered if she had

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brought him here to lecture him about Letty Underhill.

"You never had more than one subject in the old days."

"What was that?"

"Yourself."

He prided himself on never acknowledging a hit. "I still find that subject more interesting than any other. But I will admit a second, for this occasion only — Celia Dittany."

"You're too ignorant of it, Francis. It won't last you all morning."

"I'm beginning to suspect that it might last a man his whole life."

She quoted teasingly, "'May I inquire whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?'"

"I see you read one at least of my favourite authors," Harland returned. "Tell me, Celia, what sort of books do you write? I'm curious about this new departure of yours. When may I look at one?"

"You have looked at one already, to some purpose." She laughed at his surprise.

"Name, please?" he demanded.

"Mary Holiday."

"But then—you wrote that book, *The Critic in Error*?"

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"Yes, and you reviewed it in the *Dissector*. That's one of the two things I'll never forgive you, my friend." Her eyes danced with pleasure.

"I remember quite well. It was the last piece of work I did before my uncle died and made work unnecessary. So that was you? How did you recognise the hand that wielded the scalpel? You must admit the advertisement did you no harm."

"That's true. It was almost a help. Oh, I recognised you from the style, a little, and because you said, 'She generalises from one particular'—dear old phrase that I believe you think you invented. And then I had it from a mutual friend."

"Don't say that," in parenthesis. "It's not English."

"Sorry, no more it is. Well, admit now that you were a little unkind."

"It's more than possible. In those days I was both poor and bad-tempered. Besides, if I remember rightly, everyone was praising the thing, and I preferred to be original. But I'm willing to admit that I also may have been in error. Still, you were lucky to be reviewed by me at all, Celia Mary."

"Was I? I never looked at it in that light, I confess. But I don't bear you malice. Only I shall pay you back one day."

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"For that and the other thing. What *was* the other thing, Celia?"

Such playing with flame had become habitual to him. Celia took another bite of apple. "'Questions are never indiscreet, answers sometimes may be.' You used to read him too, Francis, by way of a contrast. But that you've probably grown out of."

"I have. It's a sign of extreme and morbid youth. . . . Well, about this answer, most discreet Celia——"

"You've been given it once, you know."

"I thought I had—in a reference to my five years' unpunctuality."

"You've a good memory still, then?"

"When I choose. And so you've not forgiven me yet?"

She smiled at him for a long moment, then shook her head. "As a matter of fact, I have, Francis."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Why?"

"Because I'm too happy now to bear a grudge against anyone."

"I was afraid that was it."

She bent her head gravely, understanding him. "Did I make you feel lonely, Francis?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry. But you know," whimsically, "there's an easy remedy to take."

He laughed, his mood changing in response

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to hers. "Heaven forbid! I prefer to remain the 'permanent public temptation' that our cynic describes. You won't begin match-making for me, will you?"

"I'm not sure that you don't need it."

"I am, quite. Have you never observed, Celia, the dampening effect that marriage has upon a man? It's almost as remarkable as the corresponding improvement in a woman."

"Oh! have I improved?"

"Fishing, Celia?" he teased her. "My mind's too shallow. Leave the compliment understood."

"It's such a change to hear compliments from you. You were always so economical with them."

"I am still. Sometimes, of course, I meet the individual who wrings them from me."

Celia laughed, flung away the core of an apple, and began upon another.

"Give me one," begged Harland, stretching up his hand.

She dropped two or three on to the grass beside him. He tasted one critically, then took another of a deeper colour. "This is sweet," he said. "The first was a little green and unripe—like Celia when I first met her."

The hammock swung to and fro above him. "Wasn't I?" agreed Celia, cheek on hand, looking down at him. She was absolutely

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unoffended, which pleased Harland. "You're beginning to remember," she said.

"Had you really never forgotten?"

"No, Francis." She was gently serious for a moment. The mood did not become her ill. "I wasn't either the first or the last with you," she said. "But, you see, you were, with me—more or less—the first."

"That I did not realise."

"You see why I remembered?"

"Yes."

"It's funny, isn't it? I didn't think of Michael then." She reflected. "Of course, it's difficult to focus things when you're young." She was silent again.

"The corners of your mouth are tilting up," said Harland. "What's amusing you now?"

She said, "That ever I could have been so tragic about you."

"Were you very tragic? What a shame!"

"That's just the voice that catches us all. I wonder why Nature gave it to you."

"She neutralised it by forgetting to give me a heart—or so I'm told. I haven't investigated the matter."

"Yes, you've every disadvantage but one."

"Which is?"

"That you need looking after so badly. That's what makes you fatal."

"Celia, I begin to be afraid of you."

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"You may well be. I sent for you down here to take my revenge."

"It's yours."

She swung gently to and fro above him. "I find I can do without it, after all. I *had* remembered you with vexation. You hurt me badly once, and I hadn't forgotten it. But I can now, very easily." She stretched down her hand to him. "Please, Francis——"

He took it in his. "The end of an episode —five years late. I believe you are more generous than most women."

She was close above him, the sun shone upon her. "It's the beginning of a new episode, though. You mustn't go away from us now that we've found you again."

He loosed her hand.

"That," he said, "is a very different affair."

Silence fell between them, and a little breeze ruffled the grass under the apple trees.

"I don't understand," said Celia then.

"I told you — coming down — that you wouldn't know where to stop."

Seeing her troubled, he amplified the remark. "You are kind enough to believe that you would enjoy a friendship with me. Nothing is more unlikely. We belong to different races. You are extremely happy here. You admit yourself that I never brought you anything but trouble. I should not change if I got

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to know you again. You will be much better off without me."

He paused.

"And as for myself," he continued, "I have come—I admit it—to an age when I prefer solitude. I do not wish to be made more uncomfortable than I am likely to make myself. I think that you would have a disturbing effect upon me, Celia. You are rather too charming to be contemplated with equanimity. And I am quite sure that Michael would complete my ruin."

He smiled curiously.

Said Celia, chin on hand, "How old are you exactly, Francis?"

"Thirty-two. That's neither here nor there. I want an easy life, and I am afraid of you both."

"Because we understand how to be happy?"

"That is—in substance—what it all amounts to."

He stared at her curiously.

"How do you find out all these things?" he inquired. "You are—if I may be permitted the expression—most damnably clear-sighted. You've no business to understand any of the things I've been saying to you."

"I've had the advantage of a year's tuition—and five years' study."

"At the same time, you are the most promising pupil I have yet discovered."

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"Perhaps I'm just beginning to find out how much—or how little—of you need be taken seriously."

"If only I can convince you that I am never to be taken seriously."

"Oh, I don't think so badly of you as all that."

"I wish you would."

Sighing, she looked across open country. Harland lay watching her with a repentant kindness. When she turned her head towards him:

"Don't you see," he said, "I've begun to worry you already? Much better take my advice and have done with me."

She spread out her hands. "Children always want what's bad for them."

He shook his head at her in gentle reproof. "I know. I've often wondered what the psychological reason for it can be. But we don't give them poison, all the same."

"Then you refuse to have any more to do with me? Shall I be angry with you for it?"

"It would be ungrateful—and very natural. If it is any consolation to you, Celia—certainly."

She laughed gently. "You know I can't manage it. I shall have to forgive you again. Do all women find you as hard to manage?"

"There was never one who understood me

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so quickly. That is why I am running away from you."

Celia said, "But it is something else you're running away from, really."

. . . . . .

Said Harland, trying to recover himself, "Why won't you take my explanation? I have been endeavouring to persuade you—as I could so easily persuade myself—that I'm afraid of falling in love with you. Don't you find that easy to believe? Most women would." He sneered a little.

Celia answered undisturbedly, "But you see, you're not."

"Well, that's true enough, if you will have truth, which is a thing I dislike."

"Just this once give me the whole of it. It's Michael you're afraid of?" Her eyes were as clear as those of a child; her question seemed to have its answer already. Harland could not deny her.

"You know too much, Celia," said he, as once before; and he turned aside where he lay, and leaned his head on his hand as if he were weary.

"But why Michael?"

"It's not Michael only," returned Harland, speaking in a less measured tone than was habitual to him. "It's you as well . . . and this house . . . and everything. I don't under-

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stand." He spoke like an angry and bewildered child.

"Are you afraid that we shall hurt you?" said Celia pityingly.

"You do," retorted Harland, sitting up and looking at her. "You make me lonely . . . Michael reminds me of things . . . he wants me to forget myself and learn to be unhappy." He realised his own emotion, checked himself, laughing nervously, and ran on in a more customary tone: "There's a plot among you all to reform me, and I'm determined to frustrate it. The monkeys won't talk, you know, for fear they should be made to work. I refuse to be serious, for the same reason. I can deceive myself into any emotion . . . you heard me last night . . . but they none of them last. I won't let anything go deep enough to hurt me. Be warned in time, Celia, and let me alone."

She said, "I'll not trouble you, Francis, till you ask for it. But . . . I'm not so sure about Michael, or Marshdikes either, for that matter. They may get hold of you yet. They're both rather dangerous, as I know." The shadow of a reflection crossed her face.

"They've caught *you*?" questioned Harland, rather strangely.

She bent her head. "Body and soul," she answered, as if to her own self, looking at her

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hands, where Michael's wedding-ring shone. And she was silent for a moment; but then, glancing up and shaking off her mood, she cried merrily, "I didn't escape, and you won't either. Believe me, you won't, Francis. Give in gracefully while you may."

Harland responded, "I'll draw a little Futurist picture of Marshdikes pursuing with great leaps and bounds, whilst a diminutive Francis Harland flees before it. You've supplied me with a new nightmare, Celia. Is that the part of a thoughtful hostess?"

"Oh, poor Francis! You'll never come here again after the way we've treated you."

She rose to her feet, and stood looking down at him.

"I've no complaint of the way I've been treated," said he. "But"—he stood up leisurely, stretching himself like an animal waking—"I am not coming again."

Celia stood opposite to him, and put both hands on his shoulders. She did not speak, nor did he; but after a moment he put up his own hands and moved hers gently away. He shook his head at her and smiled, thinking of Letty Underhill, whom she would have had him marry.

There came voices at the gate of the orchard.

"I hear the return of the faithful," said

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Harland. "Many thanks for a delightful morning."

"It's all very well——" began Celia.

"Pardon me . . . it is extremely ill—for me. But I am older than you, and wiser."

"You're not," she retorted. "Only wait and you'll see."

"What surprises have you in store for me?" She did not answer. "I admit that I am afraid of your magic, Celia. But I must continue to laugh at it, for the sake of keeping my courage up."

"'He laughs best who laughs last.' You've not done with Michael yet, or with Marshdikes either."

They both smiled at the last nonsensical addition.

"I admit that you have potent allies," said Harland. "But whatever your conjugal plans, and whatever the influence of Marshdikes, I decline to acknowledge my errors. I prefer flight to being convinced of them. I am going to London to-morrow, and wild horses shall not drag me back to this delectable neighbourhood."

He stooped to pick up the last of the red apples and put it into Celia's hand. She stood holding the fruit and smiling perplexedly at him. The sun shone upon her golden head.

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"Lady Venus," said Harland, "you are the most dangerous being I have ever met, and the most charming."

The apple fell from her hand again. She made a little gesture of helplessness that Francis Harland found adorable. He began to laugh, and Michael and Letty came up demanding the joke.

"You ought to be ashamed, both of you," said Michael. "Spending all Sunday morning in an orchard, eating apples."

"Mine were sour," Harland replied.

"An' serve you right."

"That," agreed Harland, "is quite true. Michael, I must go home to-morrow."

"Then you must get a ride this afternoon," returned Michael. "I've a mare that was born to carry you. Come an' look at her in the stable now before lunch."

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V

THE CAPTURE

THE black mare was certainly worthy of a good rider. Harland, who spent his winters in the shires, discussed her with Michael in the stable for a pleasant half-hour before lunch. The mare stretched her neck, stamped her hoofs in the straw, and rolled a suspicious eye upon her visitors. "She's more than Celia can manage," said Michael, though this needed little demonstration. "I'm having my man break her in till I can take her myself. I've been riding very little lately, one way and another." He sighed a little, then laughed, and patted the mare's neck.

Harland inquired, "What did you give for her?"

Michael confessed, "More than I could afford, I know. But I couldn't resist her." He grinned shamefacedly. "You'll justify me when you ride her. They call her Venus. We must find her a better name."

"What's the country like hereabouts?"

"Blind, inland. You must take her on the

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marsh, and try her at some of those dikes. She jumps like . . ." Words failed him to describe the mare's excellence.

The horses came round to the door after lunch, and Letty appeared in her cross-saddle habit, looking more like a boy than ever. Celia's grey, Jacobin, took sugar amiably, and was loth to leave his mistress's attentions. The black mare fretted to be gone. When Harland mounted she danced all across the road. Harland quieted her till Letty joined him. They rode away together down the lane. The mare fretted at her bit and infected even the staid Jacobin with her eagerness. Harland laughed curtly. He was in the mood for a struggle.

After a mile they crossed a stone bridge into the fields, and went in single file along the dike. The mare eyed the water to her left and sidled delicately. But after a couple of gates and a narrow ditch, which she jumped perfectly, they came to the end of the fields. There succeeded an open common and good turf for miles. The mare cantered divinely, and Jacobin waited upon her. The sky was blue, the gorse yellow, the air blew fresh from the sea. Harland forgot his troubles.

They rode out to the sandhills and the edge of the sea. To their left, low down, was the black-and-white lighthouse at Dungeness. The

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inland country showed far off, with a clearness that betokened rain. There was a strong south-west wind, that blew among the bent grass.

"The weather'll change to-night," said Letty. "I know the look of it."

They turned the horses towards home, taking a road across. The hill where the Dittanys' house stood was clear before them, and Harland saw how the two poplars by it were a landmark to all the country round. He rode with a slack rein, thinking of the morning's talk. It seemed to him that Marshdikes watched him curiously, waiting for him to return to it. He said to himself, with a feeling of thankfulness, "To-morrow I shall be gone."

They came to a bridge over a dike. It was narrow, and Letty rode ahead on Jacobin. She turned to call over her shoulder, "We must hurry if we want to get back for tea." Venus sidled a little, daintily, as she heard the voice, and with it the scramble of Jacobin's hoofs on the rising, badly made road. Harland did not check her as he should have done; he was thinking disturbedly of many things, and his hand was idle.

Then from under the bridge the heron flapped up, her great grey wings outspread, with a hoarse cry of alarm. She was not three

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yards away, and both horses plunged wildly. Letty kept her seat, and quieted Jacobin sharply. At the same moment the mare went by her on her left hand, riderless and terrified, with a great clatter of stones. Letty wrenched the grey round, and saw Harland lying face down, as the mare had thrown him. He did not move.

The heron sailed overhead, and went down wind to the nearest reed-bed. The sound of the mare's hoofs died away. Letty was left alone.

She dismounted. Jacobin stood quietly enough now. It seemed best to knot his reins about the fence on the near side of the road, and leave him cropping the grass. This done, the girl went back to Harland and knelt beside him.

She was small and lightly built. She could not lift Harland, who was tall, but she managed to shift him so that he lay face upwards. Then at a groan from the unconscious man she desisted, frowning, to speculate on his injuries. One, at least, was obvious from the position of head and shoulder and twisted left arm.

"Collar-bone," reflected Letty, who had seen the like before. "He'll have pitched on his shoulder. Is that all?" She was not sure of the arm itself, though, feeling it gently, she detected nothing amiss. There was also a cut

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on the head, that might have ill effects. Meanwhile, Harland remained unconscious, and breathed heavily.

Letty Underhill stood up, and looked about her. The marsh was empty, as far as she could see; nothing moved on it but the shadows of the clouds. Marshdikes was two miles away or more, and the road was lonely. Jacobin stretched his neck, whinnying uneasily.

"Venus 'll have gone home," reflected Letty. "Or not? I don't know. This is a nice business." She looked at Harland's face, which was white. "You've bad luck always, Francis."

It was possible to climb the fence and get down to the dike. Letty steeped her handkerchief there in the marsh water, and came back to wipe Harland's forehead, not unskilfully. She had hands that were quick and gentle in their movements. After three or four minutes Harland came to himself. Characteristically, he did not speak until he had remembered what brought him to his present position. Then, steadily enough:

"The mare's been too much for me," he said, with the ghost of a smile. "What's she done?"

Letty, wasting no time in lamentations, told him his injuries. Harland confirmed her in-

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formation by an attempted movement of his left arm, that brought the sweat to his forehead. Then, "Has she bolted?"

Letty nodded.

"I'll have to walk, I suppose. How far?"

"It's two miles. You can't do it."

"In a little. You'll have to tie me up. I've had this happen once before." His voice became a trifle unsteady; he shut his eyes, drawing the fox-red brows together painfully.

Letty waited, respecting the moment. When it was over: "There's Jacobin," she said, "if you can mount. He'll be steady if I lead him, and it's a cross-saddle."

"Well . . . give me five minutes."

Letty gave them, summoning forgotten medical knowledge to her aid meanwhile. It seemed useful to unwind the long linen stock from her neck, in view of the bandaging that might be required. Then she waited until Harland, steadying his voice, remarked, "Now, Letty, a little surgery."

Under his direction she wedged back the limp shoulder, putting his handkerchief and her own under the armpit, and tied his arm scientifically firm. The process was a little difficult and more than a little painful. Harland said, "An excellent piece of work," rather faintly at the end of it all; but the girl saw the trickle of blood from his bitten lip, and could not trust

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herself to speak. Her hands were unsteady over the last knot.

After another few moments she got him to his feet, and then to the saddle. Jacobin seemed to understand what was amiss; he stood patiently, and moved, when he did move, with deliberation. Harland, swaying a little in the saddle, managed nevertheless to remain there. The journey began. It was an extraordinarily painful business, but it ended at last at Marshdikes gate. Celia and Michael, coming to the door unwarned, beheld a man, just dismounted, who stood with one arm across Jacobin's saddle to support himself.

"Oh! what's happened?" cried Celia, coming quickly to them. "Francis, you're hurt!"

"The mare . . ." began Letty. "He was thrown . . ."

But Francis Harland had, as ever, his own explanation.

"Marshdikes . . ." said he, rather faintly, "I . . . shan't escape you to-morrow after all." And as Michael sprang forward to help him, he wavered, slipped in some curious fashion to his knees, and fainted, despite himself, on the threshold of the house.

He came back out of long darkness, and wondered where he might be. He stared at a low ceiling above him, too weary to turn his

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head. There was a reminiscent smell of drugs in his nostrils that made him think of pain. He could not move, and he thought at first that there must be some weight upon him that held him down. He became conscious of sounds near by, rustling and whispering, and a door that was opened or shut. His eyelids were heavy, but he would not close them, for fear of the oblivion that had just receded from him. He stared upwards, trying to clear his mind. Something appeared to it . . . blue sky . . . the heron's wings . . . a horse that trampled in a dream. He turned sideways, and a flame of agony went through him, making him remember everything. In spite of himself, he cried out. Celia came to him, moving quickly. In the shadow of the room her face was close to his. Her eyes were large, sweet, and serious; they looked at him with concern. He knew her at once, and he said to her, with extraordinary and futile gaiety, "You should change the mare's name to Reformer." This seemed to him a perfectly lucid and apposite remark. He was troubled to find that it did not make her smile. And then he became too weary to trouble about anything, and fell on sleep. . . .

When next he woke there was sunshine in the room. He lay watching its reflection on the ceiling until he was sure of himself, then

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turned his head carefully, for fear of pain, and saw where he was. The room was his own at Marshdikes, and it was morning. The window stood open; there was a pot of Michaelmas daisies on the sill. The curtain blew about in a gentle draught. Harland wondered how long he had lain there.

The door opened, and someone came in—a woman, by the rustling of her skirts. He hoped that it would be Celia Dittany, and waited till she should come within his vision. But she proved to be an old servant that he had noticed about the house the day before. She smiled when she saw that he was awake.

He asked her various questions that troubled him. His arm and collar-bone, she said, were broken, and had been set the night before while he was still unconscious. He had been slightly delirious in the night, but now he would soon be on the road to recovery. That was the doctor's opinion.

"How long must I stop here?" demanded Harland. "I . . . haven't the patience to be ill, you know. Besides, I'm in the way."

The woman laughed. "You'll not get better if you worry yourself, sir. I'm sure Mrs. Dittany doesn't mind any trouble."

Her patient said, with an unusual expression, "I see you've fallen a victim too."

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She did not follow the turn. "They'll soon make you well here, sir," she said, trying to humour him.

He answered, "That's just what I'm so afraid of." She thought that he had not yet quite recovered from the effects of his fall.

And then the door opened and Celia came in. The sunshine came with her, shining in her loosened tangle of golden hair and round about her slender self. She asked, "How are you, Francis?" and her voice was as beautiful as spring. But Francis Harland shut his eyes, as if against too much light. He was still afraid of Celia, and he knew that he was bound now at her mercy.

The old woman went away. Celia came and sat down by the bed. The light was behind her. She leaned forward, her hands about her knees in a schoolgirl attitude. Harland was afraid, with the fear of the injured, lest she should come near him or touch him. He knew that if she did this pain would make him cry out, and he set his teeth. But Celia did not make any movement. "Oh, Francis," she remarked, looking whimsically at him, "this really is bad luck on you." Her voice and the quiet of her ways were like a spring of healing. Harland tried to smile in answer.

"It comes of my not thinking what I'm

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doing," said he. "I . . . shall never dare . . . boast of my riding again." His voice was not particularly steady, and there were breaks between his words. He had not altogether accustomed himself to the strain of her presence as yet.

"Oh, poor Francis! And just when you were hoping to get away from us."

He turned a little where he lay, so that he could look up at her more easily. ("Don't try to move!") . . .

"I'm not a cripple yet . . . altogether." The pain he had given his shoulder was made less unendurable by her solicitude. "As you say, I've failed to make my escape. It's unfortunate, to say the least of it. You'll agree with me this time, Celia?"

She shook her head prettily. "I'm afraid not. I don't like your being hurt, but I'm awfully glad I've got you to look after. I told you you needed it, didn't I?"

"No earlier than yesterday. I have not forgotten. The Fates seem to play into your hands, my dear." His forehead was deeply lined.

She glanced at him reflectively. "Do you know, I think it's the first time in my life you've ever called me that?"

"The neglect has been unpardonable."

She laughed, very gently. "You'd let your

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tongue run away with you on your death-bed, Francis. But I don't mind. You are forgiven."

"I wish you didn't understand me so well."

"In other words, you want to be taken seriously for once. Francis, you're not yourself."

"I am not indeed, Celia." The room was swinging round him curiously. His voice became strange in his own ears, and darkness was near to him.

Then came Celia's arm under his head, and in his mouth the stinging of wine. He recaptured strength again, and heard her say, "Oh, you've talked too much. You shouldn't . . . you shouldn't indeed."

Her voice was trouble itself. He did not find it bitter to have her help him.

"I always . . . talk too much," said he. "You'll have to look after me, after all . . ."

"We will . . . oh, we will. Drink this and lie quiet."

He drank, and remained without movement until weariness closed his eyes again. Celia Dittany, beside him, watched his sleep. . . .

Later, the old woman came, and Celia went down to the parlour. Michael sat there, by a wood fire, for the day was a little cold. He turned his head as she came in and sprang up.

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He was always like a young lover with her. She came across to the fire with him, her arm in his.

"How's our Francis?"

"Better now, and awake. The doctor said he'd be himself again after that sleep. Now he ought to get on quickly. It was a clean sort of break. Only he's not strong, of course, and so restless. He will talk and try to move. He's a dreadfully bad patient."

"Better than I am, I hope."

"Michael, don't." There was quick anxiety in her voice; she put up her hand to stop his words. Then, turning his face towards her and studying it with frightened inquiry, "Michael, you look worse to-day," she murmured.

He put her hand gently aside. "Don't worry, darling. Keep that for Francis. He needs it more than I do."

She was still apprehensive at first, but he quieted her with a kiss. Then, letting herself be persuaded, "Poor Francis," she repeated gently. Her voice was very sweet. Michael listened to it with a pleasure that was almost pain.

They talked of Francis Harland.

"He's a disappointed man. He can't settle to anything. He's got more brains than any of us, but no driving power. It's a pity he's

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so well off. If he had to work for his living, now . . ."

Celia laughed. "Do you want to have him ruined financially for the good of his soul?"

"I wish I could." He grinned. "No use being melodramatic, though, is it? He'll have to be reformed some other way."

"Shall I take him in hand?"

"I'm not sure that he'll let you."

"Uncomplimentary! But . . ." she thought of the orchard. "I'm afraid he won't. In fact, he refused to yesterday, more or less."

Michael nodded, pacing up and down with her. "There's not much we can do for him. He's been at this way of life too long. Be as good to him as you can, Celia, while he's with us. He's lonely, I think, and very tired."

She pressed his arm. "I understand. I'll do my best. You know, I was very fond of him once upon a time."

"I know."

Celia let her mind stray back to things that had been. Her husband did not interrupt her. After a time she came out of her reverie, and laughed a little.

"Before ever I knew you, of course. It was a very long time ago. And it's all been made up to me since, hasn't it?"

"You're quite sure?"

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"Quite sure. You didn't think anything else, did you?"

"No, Celia, I didn't."

"Oh, vanity of vanities! What a comfort it is we understand each other, Michael."

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VI

THE PHILOSOPHER IN FAIRYLAND

HARLAND'S injuries did not prove more serious than the doctor had anticipated. He was, it is true, a bad patient, and retarded his own recovery by his impatience. But, weary as he became of his enforced inaction, it was not long in reality before he came down to the parlour again. He sat there, with his splinted arm in a black sling, and Celia congratulated him on a rapid return to health.

"It seems years since I saw that bird fly up," he retorted, smilingly obstinate.

"Oh, Francis, have you been as dull as all that?"

"Probably the discipline has been good for me," said Harland, refusing her a compliment. "May I regard it as a penance for the evils of my past life?"

Michael, who had been the object of this inquiry, laughed and said that the illness might perhaps be so accepted in high quarters. His was a cheerful and unconventional creed.

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"And what's become of Venus? You must let me try her again some day, you know."

Celia looked her approval. Of all things she loved courage.

"What about that new name for her?" from Michael.

"I found it, didn't I?" Harland appealed to Celia.

"Yes. But I thought you were . . ."

"Still raving? Not at all. It was an inspiration. Reformer, Michael."

"Excellent." Michael was imperturbable. "If only she manages it."

"A good many of her sex have failed with me, haven't they?"

"We shall see if she's done better. I hope her methods are as effective as they're violent, for your sake."

He went out of the room. Harland and Celia were left together. It was about midday, and the parlour was full of sunshine.

"How nice it is to have you down again!" said Celia.

Harland lay back in his chair. He was tired by the effort of coming downstairs, and therefore perhaps a little off his guard

"That's unexpectedly kind of you, Celia," said he.

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"Why? Didn't you think I wanted you to get better?" She came to a chair near him, and as she passed she touched him lightly. "We don't hate you so much as all that, Francis." She seated herself, and took up a piece of embroidery from her work-table. Her needle began to go in and out.

"You've both been much too kind."

"I'm glad you should think so. Only you needn't say it, you know. We've both been glad to do all we could. And we had to make up for Reformer's violence, hadn't we?" She glanced up whimsically. "How's the conversion, Francis?"

He had been smiling. He was not entirely grave as he answered, "There may be more in the idea than is acceptable to me. But I am still rebellious, Celia."

"What do you think Michael means to do with you, then?"

"If I knew I would guard against it. As it is, I am helpless. I have been exposed to unfamiliar influences; I have yet to discover if they have weakened me. I am waiting—uncertainly—for Michael's attack." He was entirely nonsensical this time. "No one shall make me take life seriously."

Celia stitched quietly. "I do not, myself, take it more seriously than I must."

"But even you are tainted by the prevailing

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disease. You are a responsible married woman; I am an irresponsible bachelor. We look at life from different standpoints." He teased her gently.

"I believe I should regret it if you became absolutely dependable. You'd be so much less amusing."

"I amuse you?"

"Very much. That's why I forgive you so many things."

"Exactly." He was a trifle bitter. "I am a professional entertainer. If I ceased to amuse my world, it would throw me over."

"Only because it has never been allowed to value you for other reasons."

He did not take the speech well. "That is likely. But I can make the reflection for myself. . . . Preaching does not become you, Celia, if I may be permitted to tell you so."

She did not reply. There was a silence, during which Harland lay frowning, with closed eyes. Celia came to the end of her embroidered rose, fastened off the thread, rolled up work and implements together, and closed her work-table. Then she stood up and came across to Harland. He opened his eyes and looked up, to find her beside him.

"It hurts now it's mending up, doesn't it?" was all she said by way of reproof.

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"You should turn me out of the house," he responded. "I can't apologise adequately."

"They always told me, when I was little, that crossness was a sign of getting better. Let's hope it is." She regarded him with a maternal air of solicitude, but there were wrinkles of laughter about her eyes.

All of a sudden Harland caught her hand and put it fiercely to his lips.

She withdrew it. "I don't like you when you do that sort of thing."

He had repented already of his feeling, whatever it may have been; nevertheless, he shrugged his shoulders, remarking, "You should take all the kisses you can get. There's little enough time for them. Ten years . . . fifteen perhaps . . . who knows? We're all getting old, and life's as short as a bad dream." He had intended to put disgust and anger into her face. He stopped, amazed, finding it white with fear. "Don't . . . oh, don't!" cried Celia, putting out her hands to stop his phrases.

Not having the clue to her vehemence, he was silent, and stared at her. In a moment she was herself again. "I'm sorry. But you frightened me, you know . . . and the other night when you sang. I'm happy . . . I daren't think that my happiness might come to an end."

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Harland bent his head. He was still perplexed, but a little nearer understanding her thought. "I also am sorry. It was unpardonable of me. Think, if you like, that I am jealous of your happiness."

She sighed, unclasping her hands as if a strain were over. "Poor Francis! I wish I could give you what I've had."

He shook his head. "You never could. Some of us are born without the capacity for happiness, just as some of us are born tone-deaf or colour-blind. We make up with frivolity or sarcasm. It saves us a great deal of pain, I believe, in the long-run."

She said, "Is there no one in this world who can help you?"

"No one. And consequently no one who can hurt me."

"I don't like to believe it."

"Why should it trouble you? I am very contented with my way of life."

"That's just the pity."

"*Au contraire*, it is the extreme of wisdom on my part."

"Has no one ever managed to make you uneasy?"

He smiled as if he were in pain. "Many people, in the half-hour that was given them. It doesn't last. There never was a man who didn't irritate me before I'd decided to follow

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him . . . or a woman who could please me after I'd kissed her once."

. . . . . .

On another day, as he sat in the garden: "Here's a letter for you from Letty," said Celia, coming to him from the house, her hands full of books and papers. The post had just come in.

"You'll have to be kind and open it, if I'm to read it," said Harland, from his deck-chair. His arm was still in a sling, though he had made a good recovery, and was to leave Marshdikes shortly.

Celia slit the envelope for him and gave him the closely written sheet. Letty had been obliged to leave for town on the day after Harland's accident, but she had written for news many times, and twice to Harland himself. To-day he glanced through her letter, with its unsuccessful pretence at mere friendly inquiry, and frowned half-humorously at its length. Then he allowed it to escape from his hand, and sat back wearily.

"Your post doesn't please you?" demanded Celia, with some sharpness.

He glanced up, to find her watching him keenly. He avoided her look.

"I'm sorry. The fault is mine."

"Have you quarrelled with Letty?"

"It takes two to make a quarrel. Letty is

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unfortunately kind-hearted. She persists in thinking well of me."

"She's not alone in that."

"Don't join her, Celia dear."

Celia said, "You're so unsatisfactory, Francis. I wish . . ."

"Shall I tell you what? You wish I would marry, and adopt one of the useful professions, and altogether become a reasonable member of society. Isn't that right?"

"More or less. You're making it sound as dull as you can, of course."

"But not nearly so dull as it in fact appears to me. I wasn't created to supply the domestic virtues, you know. The loss is mine, I dare say. Still, the fact remains. My life is full. I would not change it."

"But it doesn't satisfy you."

He shrugged his shoulders. "We are none of us perfectly happy. But we all think that we can secure the next man's happiness by our advice. Why this self-confidence? I'd rather go to hell by my own road, Celia."

"I'm glad you realise your ultimate destination." They both laughed, because it was their practice to laugh when they were saddest. "But your ultimate destination does worry me, all the same," said Celia.

"That, my dear girl, is very unnecessary.

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I was born to be idle and selfish, and I fulfil my Creator's intention."

"That's profane, and Calvinistic, and I don't like it."

"Why should it disturb you more than any similar phase in this unsatisfactory existence of mine?"

"Because I'm fond of you, Francis."

He answered in a low voice, after a pause, "That is more than unnecessary, it is foolish."

"And yet you can't prevent it."

"I wish I could. You know so little about me, Celia."

"I understand you very well."

He replied, suddenly and fiercely, "You don't. You can't. How should you, with that child's mind of yours?" And then, more lightly, "You are a creature of inexperience. I refuse to be guided by you. Let me alone, Celia. I prefer my own theory of life to yours."

"But you know," said she, "you're not content with practising it quietly. You want to convert me."

"The gods forbid," returned he quickly.

"You're dangerous," she insisted. "All this time . . . we've been fighting . . ."

"If I should hurt your fairyland . . ." he began.

"I didn't think it was a fairyland." They

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were both abruptly serious. "I thought it was real life. I believed in everyone. I *was* right . . . you're lying . . ."

He had covered his eyes with his hand. "I admit it. Sooner than hurt you, I would recant all my most cherished opinions."

"That's not enough, unless you do it honestly." She was very much troubled.

"I can't do that. You must go your own way. You were happy before I came. Justly happy. You will see clear when I am gone. Send me away, Celia, and forget. It is the secret of life. Marshdikes can't break me, but I won't fight it any longer. I'll go, as I ought to have done at first . . . as I would have done except for that over-fanatical Reformer of yours. Laugh a little, Celia, in spite of everything." He tried to obey his own commands.

"I can't laugh at you very easily," said she.

"Why not? You and I laugh together at everything. Only your laughter is kind and mine is bitter. Once, before I go."

"If you would stay, Francis."

"Honestly, Celia, I daren't. There's the truth for once, and from Francis Harland. I always said you were a witch, you know, and here's another proof of it."

The corners of her mouth tilted a little, unwillingly.

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"That's an improvement. Your face is sweetest when you laugh, Celia — a rare thing in a woman. Did you know it from being told, or find it out at your looking-glass? Cultivate it, and be wise. I have a motto, you know—'Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance.' Essentially untrue, but still consoling. Remember it whenever you remember me. But let that be seldom."

"Do you think you're so easily to be forgotten?"

"No compliments, Celia. I love them, but they're bad for me."

"You're certainly vain enough already."

"Most discerning of women! I wish you could infect Letty Underhill with a little of your clear-sightedness."

She agreed reflectively. "So do I. But she'll forget you, I think, fairly quickly. Only I'm sorry she should have to. You wouldn't make a bad husband, Francis."

"Celia!" He affected horror. "That is the only foolish remark I have ever heard from you."

"Perhaps it was a thought less well-considered than usual — as you would probably put it. But there's a grain of truth in it, nevertheless."

"I hope not," — gravely, — "for Letty's sake."

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Celia leant forward. "You *are* fond of Letty, you know."

"I am very fond of Letty. It is more than good of you to admit it under the circumstances. If that were everything . . ."

"I know. It is by no means everything—even for Letty, if I were thinking of her first."

"Think of her all the time. She's what matters. But she's young."

"She is, and I'm glad of it."

"So am I."

Celia stood up. "Here's Michael coming out. Francis, I wish we'd managed to reform you."

"You cannot wish it more than I do. At the same time, I thank the gods for my escape." He frowned a little, as if he were tired, and did not look at her.

Michael came across the grass, with a newspaper in his hand.

"I'm going back to-morrow," Harland announced to him.

"Haven't I heard that before?" Michael laughed. "Wish you better luck this time. As a matter of fact, it's time you went."

"I know it is."

"Here's another reason for you, though." Michael flung down his newspaper on the garden seat, and indicated a paragraph with a long, dramatic forefinger.

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Celia leaned to read over Harland's shoulder. The paper announced the illness of a certain Charles Grainger, a member of Parliament.

"That's your division." Celia did not make this a question.

"I have a house there, certainly," responded Harland dryly.

"If he's as bad as it says . . ."

"Oh, he's done for this time," said Harland. "He's seventy-three. There'll be a by-election, if that's what Michael means. It doesn't concern me. *I'm* not the unfortunate individual who's going to stand for the place." He pushed the newspaper from him.

There was a short silence.

"Will you stay for the afternoon train?" inquired Michael hospitably. "It's a pity to rush off early."

"It's a pity to go at all. I'm sure you're not fit to travel." Thus Celia. "Stop a day or two longer."

Their kindness was unchanged, but Harland replied to it with a little less than his usual deference. He said that he would take the morning train, and deprecated an undue consideration of his hurts. "There's nothing whatever the matter with me now," he said, adding, with somewhat mechanical and laboured politeness, "thanks to both of you."

Celia's candid look was all distress. Harland

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could not meet it fair. Michael looked at him with an enigmatic amusement that was more unexpected but no less disturbing. Harland took refuge in a sullen quiet.

Next day he bade his hosts a conventional farewell, and returned to London, congratulating himself on his escape.

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VII

THE LAST LAUGH

A FEW words will dispose of the previous career of Francis Harland. His parents had not been rich, and he had educated himself by a series of scholarships. He had done well at his school, and had proved the most brilliant failure of his year at Oxford. Then he came to London, and took up journalism, but soon tired of it. Finally, he contrived to get himself adopted by a rich uncle, who died obligingly a few years after. At thirty Francis Harland found himself with a small country place, a house in Westminster, and a comfortable fortune, of which he had not earned a penny. He did what was necessary for his family, and continued his bachelor existence with little change. He travelled a good deal, hunted regularly in the winter, and spent his summers in town and country very pleasantly. The object of his life was amusement, and he found plenty of people ready to help him in his search. If it became less easy with the

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passage of time, he blamed himself rather than the quality of his pursuits.

He reflected on these things with care as he travelled back to town from Marshdikes, and told himself that the Dittanys, if they were attractive, were also very foolish. He had enjoyed his stay with them well enough, in spite of the broken shoulder, but he would have been sorry to prolong it indefinitely. And their plans for his future were ridiculous. He had often been asked to stand for the division where his uncle's house was, but he had always replied that the prospect did not tempt him in the least. And the remark, if not altogether true, was yet decided enough to impose upon himself and others.

"Nothing would induce me to do it," declared Francis Harland to the railway carriage.

Arrived in London, he took a taxi to his own house in Westminster. It was small and charming, though rather heavily furnished. Old Harland had lived there for many years before his death, and had left his mark upon the place, in spite of his nephew's recent changes. Young Harland entered the narrow hall, collected his letters, and went on to his study. It was a sombre place by day, but lamp-lit, as now, it seemed comfortable. Harland moved his favourite chair up to the hearth, and sat down lazily. It was past

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seven o'clock, and he was a little tired by his journey.

"I'll dine here," he thought. "It's too much trouble to go to the club."

He opened his letters, as best he could with one hand, and read them. They proved all to be on pleasant subjects. Two or three dinner invitations attracted him; there was an offer of a week-end's shooting somewhere, and the terms of lease for a hunting-box in the shires that he meant to take that winter. He reflected on his projects, and thought that life would be especially attractive for the next six months.

"The Manifold division," reflected he. "Speeches . . . village halls . . . night work . . . the British elector . . ." He laughed quietly, and lay back in his chair, stretching his legs towards the fire. Above him, over the chimney-piece, hung a painting of old Joseph Harland, taken the year before he died. Young Harland glanced up at it, with the careless pity of the successor for him who is no more in power.

"You never wasted your time like that, did you?" The cynical eyes and lips of the portrait sneered out of darkness, as if the idea were exquisitely humorous. "Nor in getting married, either . . ." Francis Harland laughed again at his own thoughts, a trifle bitterly.

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His face became grave as he sat there, and after a while he frowned. The journey had tired him, perhaps, more than he realised.

He spent the next few days restlessly. There were many things that offered themselves to be done, but none appeared interesting. Harland began to look forward to the week-end, for which he had a shooting invitation to the north; and he told himself that October was not a month to spend in town. The newspapers continued to busy themselves with Charles Grainger's condition, which was apparently serious. Harland, however, persisted in maintaining that the old man would recover, and gave that as his opinion to several people, who asked him for the latest news.

On the Thursday he had a letter from an influential man in the constituency, inquiring unofficially whether he would stand in the event of Grainger's death. Harland frowned as he read it. He did not answer it at once. He persuaded himself that a few hours could make no difference, and that he wished to think over the terms of his refusal.

He had for that night an engagement that annoyed him. It was a dinner at the House of Commons, given by an uncle of Letty Underhill's, an old politician, and an influential man on the Liberal side. Harland very much

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wished that he had refused the invitation. He would be obliged to spend the evening in a political atmosphere, electric probably, since an important division was to be taken. He would be beset with covert questions from Letty's uncle about Grainger and Manifold; and Letty herself would be there, all mute reproach for his treatment of her. He walked the ten minutes from his own house to St. Stephen's in a bad humour. As he went by the Abbey he saw from the news-sheets in the gutter that Charles Grainger had died that afternoon. The flaring letters seemed part of a conspiracy against him. He went on, vexedly.

There seemed more people than usual in the Hall and the passages beyond it. Harland thought that the place hummed a little, like a hive of angry bees that someone has shaken. He found his party waiting for him. They also were inclined to excitement. Letty's uncle was didactic and pompous; a young candidate and his wife talked eagerly of what the evening might bring forth; an older couple, strange to these circles, accepted information greedily. There were besides a secretary of the member's and a young doctor, a college friend of Michael Dittany and Harland. Letty herself was large-eyed and a little too earnest, as was her way; she hung on her uncle's

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words. The colour came into her cheeks when she saw Harland, and he began to feel irritable.

They went down to dinner almost at once, Harland and the candidate's wife as partner.

"I'm always a little afraid of this place," she began. "It frightens me."

"Why?" demanded Harland, a trifle sharply.

"It takes so much from people," she replied, with a genuine note in her voice.

Harland did not answer her at once. They were making their way among the crowd in the central hall. There was a great deal of noise, that echoed up to the high roof. Harland had not meant to look towards the folding-doors of the Chamber, but they drew him in spite of himself. As he went by they stood open. He heard an increase of noise, coming from within; he caught a glimpse of receding perspective, of the small, narrow room, and what was passing there. . . . "It's absurd," he said aloud, "to let oneself be affected by a thing like that." The woman beside him turned a surprised face to him, and did not answer. He saw that he had offended her, but he made no apology. He had not, indeed, been speaking to her at all, but to another and more obstinate adversary, whom he did not name.

She talked little to him at dinner in the underground room. Her husband had just

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been adopted by his first constituency, and she had no other subject. She addressed herself almost entirely to Letty's uncle, who gave her professional advice against the next election. Harland was left to Letty Underhill, who sat on his other side. She talked of Marshdikes wistfully. By common consent they avoided personal topics. Harland was still one-handed. He ate clumsily, and Letty watched him with eyes of compassion. Harland began to think that he hated her.

Towards the end of the dinner her uncle leant across, and spoke to Harland of Charles Grainger. "Are you going to succeed him? You're their obvious choice." He knew the constituency well.

Harland would not meet Letty's eyes. "His successor's not chosen yet." He was almost maddened by the man's fat chuckle, his knowing, "Ah! nothing settled . . . nothing official. Keep it dark! . . . very sound."

After dinner Letty and the candidate's wife went excitedly to the ladies' gallery. The host was called away. His guests remained in the private room where he had left them. There was a great fire and the room was very hot. Harland stood near the open window for coolness, and talked to Dick Johnstone, the doctor, of his visit to Marshdikes and of Michael.

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It was then that Marshdikes stretched out a hand, and took him, in spite of all resistance.

"Poor old Michael . . ." said Dick Johnstone. "I've never been more sorry for a man."

Harland's eyebrows went up. "I admit that I hadn't thought it necessary to pity Michael. A charming wife . . . a delightful house . . . a successful career . . ."

"And the fear of having to leave it all—at any time, without warning."

"What do you mean by that, Richard?" Harland's voice was unshaken, but there was a note in it that made Johnstone look up quickly.

"Don't you know?" he cried. "Didn't they tell you?"

"They told me nothing . . . in words. I am beginning to understand a little. If you will explain . . ." Harland's face was white.

"There's not much to explain. Heart trouble. He must always have been liable, and of course he's overworked for years. But he knocked himself up finally about two years ago, helping some man over an election. Never rested for weeks; you know his style. Then it came out. He was pretty far gone before they consulted me. I've been trying to patch him up ever since. He won't take proper care of himself, of course. It's only women that will. Keeps on putting himself back by some

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madness or other. Says he must have all the life he can get, and laughs at me for an alarmist."

"He always laughed, of course," said Harland.

"Yes." They were both very much moved, though neither expressed it in words.

"And his wife?"

"She's extraordinarily brave. She knows, of course. I had to tell her it might be any time. I never knew a woman take that kind of thing so well. She won't let herself be miserable, for fear of worrying him. She's determined, I think, that he shall be perfectly happy for as long . . ." Johnstone broke off abruptly; then resumed, in a more steady tone, "You'd never think, to see them, that they'd any trouble at all."

"I . . . didn't," Harland replied.

"I'm surprised you didn't find out, in all the time you must have been there."

"It wouldn't be like either of them to tell me."

"That's true."

"And I didn't see for myself." Harland made the admission with difficulty. "There was no reason why they should have enlightened me. I am not a particularly close friend. I had no right to the information . . . as things were." He spoke as if he were in

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pain. Johnstone made some inarticulate expression of sympathy or anger. They were silent together for a little.

"And it might be . . . any time?" reverting to an earlier phrase.

"More or less." Dick Johnstone gave medical details. "Of course, excitement . . . or any great exertion. . . . She's a fine nurse . . . Mrs. Dittany . . . keeps him quiet if anyone can. He's a better patient than he was. He may last some time yet." Johnstone swore abruptly and fiercely. "It's such a waste. When I remember Michael . . . all he was and all he meant to be. . . . One gets used to death in my profession, but *Michael* . . ." To his unimaginative nature, as to Harland's, that tortured itself perpetually in imagination, there was bewilderment in the thought. Michael should never have died. He was so absolutely alive; he loved his world with so much eagerness. "It would have mattered far less," reflected Harland bitterly, "if any one of us had died instead. What use are we compared with him?" The thought was so vivid that he believed he had spoken it aloud. But Johnstone did not look up, as he would have done at the actual voice, and Harland understood that he had only dreamed.

"I wish it had been myself," he brought out abruptly and sincerely.

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Johnstone nodded. "You're not the only one." His voice was harsh. "Michael . . ." he said again; and relapsed into his own thoughts.

Harland said to himself, "This is what Celia meant, all the time, when she was afraid. If I had only known. . . . And Michael tried to get me on to his side, of my own free will, without telling me. But I was too proud. Well, I can give in now. There's that to do for him, at least, before . . ." He left the sentence unfinished. The world seemed to have come to an end.

"It was better you should know, wasn't it?" Johnstone said.

"I shall never be able to repay you," Harland replied.

The door opened, and the young secretary came in. "Denistoun's finishing," he said, in answer to someone's request for news. "They'll take the division at eleven. It's five to, now." He had left the door open. "You'll hear something. We're not far away."

They sat silent until after the clock had struck, heard division bells, and a coming and going, and after a while the distant uproar that told of a strain relieved. Harland had a vision of the narrow chamber, the pale faces, and the shouting. He listened curiously.

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"How long before I'm there too?" he thought. "It's as good work as any other . . . good enough for me, since I've always talked too much." He smiled a little, half in pleasurable anticipation, half in memory of Celia, who had so accused him. Then he remembered Michael, and, "What use is it?" he thought. "What use now?"

There was none to answer him, but some answer came, perhaps, from his recollection of the man to whom everything was worth while. He quieted himself, and grew more calm.

The women came down, and his host returned, bringing the figures of the result. The old man was excited, and spoke with less deliberation than usual. "It's a great game," he said to Harland, almost shamefacedly.

The young man did not repulse him. "I'm beginning to see its fascination," he replied.

"Take to it in earnest, then."

Harland smiled rather strangely, as was remembered after. "I may do worse things before I . . . die."

And then the party broke up, and he went away on foot, after bidding Letty a gentle good-night. He had a very little distance to go. The sky was full of stars, and there was a great wind, that blew down the streets and made the lamps in them flicker. Harland

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walked fast, and came to his own house. It was not more than half-past eleven. He went into his study, and, sitting down before his telephone, gave a long-distance call and a number. After some time he heard the voice of that friend who had inquired whether he would contest the Manifold division. He answered: "It is Francis Harland speaking. I had your letter. . . . Yes, the news was in the papers this evening. I waited to answer until I was quite sure of my decision. It's . . . rather a new departure for me. . . . Yes, I will. . . . Are you sure of that? I admit that their preference surprises me. But you are responsible. . . . Well, as you please. I am in your hands. . . . Certainly, as humble as you like. When will that be? . . . Monday? To-day was Thursday. That's more than kind of my new masters. I admit that I have business to-morrow. And it may expand itself over Saturday. I'll report to you on Sunday afternoon, if trains admit. . . . That is more than hospitable of you. But perhaps I had better occupy the family mansion. It looks better, doesn't it? . . . I'm glad you agree. I shall be dependent on your advice throughout the campaign. . . . Not at all. Remember me to your wife. . . . Good-bye."

Harland had smiled at times during this

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controversy, and his voice had been more than careless. But after he had hung up the receiver he became grave. He walked once or twice up and down the room, and the expression of his face would have been unfamiliar to most of his acquaintances. After a time he went back to the telephone, to arrange that next day's business of which he had spoken. Having given the number, and waited some time, he began to repent. He was afraid of the voice that might answer him, and when the telephone bell rang again his colour changed a little. The hand that took up the receiver was not altogether steady.

But there came out of the distance nothing more than a clear, youthful voice that said, "Yes, this is Marshdikes. I'm Celia Dittany speaking. . . . Who are you?"

"Francis Harland . . ." He could not get further for the moment.

"Oh, Francis!" He could hear her pleasure distinctly. "Good-evening, my friend. Is it Michael you want, or shall I do?"

Harland replied in a tone that did not match his look, "You will do excellently, Celia. In fact, as housekeeper, I prefer to consult you rather than . . . Michael." A little painful hesitation, immediately conquered, preceded the name. "Would it make any disturbance if I

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were to come down to-morrow for the day? I want to ask Michael a question. Tell me if I shall be unwelcome."

"Of course not." He heard her laugh, adorable and happy as that of a child, and he winced at it. "But, Francis, this is against all your principles. Has Marshdikes got the laugh of you after all, that you're coming back again?" She mocked him from an infinite distance, with fairylike mirth. He frowned, and shut his eyes for a moment, as if he were in pain. He replied, nevertheless:

"Marshdikes has won the last trick, Celia. I'll tell you about it when I come. But you may give Michael a piece of news, if you like."

"Yes? What?"

"I'm going to stand for the Manifold division, if they'll have me."

"Francis dear, how splendid! But you shall tell him yourself."

"Oh, I've other things to say to him. Let him know that at once, will you, Celia dear? And good-night."

He heard her answering "Good-night," very sweet and far away, then came silence.

"So we control our destinies," reflected Harland. "Twenty minutes, more or less . . . and my liberty's gone." He smiled on one side of his mouth. "If anyone had prophesied this end to my pleasant life . . .

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Where shall I be this time next year, and what will have become of me? This time next year . . ." He thought of one thing that the year might finish, and a sound escaped his lips that might have been either laughter or tears. He himself could not tell which it most resembled. "The last laugh . . ." he said aloud. There was no laughter in his voice now; and after a moment he covered his face with his hands.

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VIII

MICHAEL'S WIFE

At Marshdikes Michael heard the other side of the conversation. He sat before the fire, and his wife knelt by the table where the telephone stood. He watched her face in all its quick changes as she spoke. When she had finished she turned to him and cried, "Oh, Michael! Francis is coming down for the day to-morrow."

"That'll be delightful," Michael replied. "You'll be glad to see your patient again."

Celia came and sat beside him on the arm of his chair.

"It's not me he's coming for," she smiled. "It's you this time. He wants to talk to you, he said."

"That's his bad taste. And what's the news you're to tell me, Celia?"

"Guess."

"Not I. I might guess right, you know."

"You're capable of a good deal, Michael;

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but I think . . . I really think, that Francis will have puzzled you this time."

"I warn you that, unless he's married, I shall be surprised at nothing. Is it a real shock? Don't raise my hopes too high."

She leaned on his shoulder; they laughed together like two happy children. "No, he's not married. Something much more exciting than that. If you're not altogether dumbfounded, I shall be really angry with you."

"I'll make a guess, and risk your anger, Celia darling. He's going to contest that election."

"*Michael* . . ."

"Oh, I can do a great deal more than that. My child, your husband is a much cleverer man than you think. This fine brain . . ."

She stopped his mouth. "Michael, you knew all the time. You must have done."

"Honestly, I only got it from my own deductions, after hearing you on the telephone."

"It'll take me a long time to forgive you. But aren't you glad?"

"'Glad' is scarcely the word, darling. Choose any stronger one you like out of that literary vocabulary of yours, and I'll endorse it. This is just what he needs."

"It'll do him all the good in the world," she agreed. "Oh, I do hope he gets in!"

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"I don't much care if he does or not. It's the fight he's spoiling for. But I think the seat's safe enough."

"I wonder how he'll manage with electioneering."

"Well enough, I expect. He's not a bad speaker, or wasn't at the Union. He'll have to simplify a little, of course, and drop a few affectations. But I trust the excitement of the moment to help him there. It's a career that I've always wanted him to adopt. He's got so many more brains than the average party-hack. I only wish he'd begun earlier. However . . ."

Celia smiled wistfully. "We both want him to get on, don't we?" she said.

"I'm thankful that he's going to give himself a chance at last."

They were silent for a time.

"I didn't expect," began Celia, "when he was down here, that this would ever happen. He seemed to have made up his mind so absolutely against it. Didn't you think that too?"

Michael smiled. "Well, if you won't be very angry with me again . . . I didn't."

"But he was so impatient, he thought we were so foolish."

"All put on."

"How do you mean?"

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"Don't you understand? He felt he was slipping . . . knew he wouldn't be able to hold out against himself. So he tried to defend his position all the more fiercely . . . wouldn't admit that he was in the wrong . . . that was all. And now he's let go . . . given in . . . means to do penance, you'll see."

"I see. All the same, I don't think I'm pleased to find that you understand him so much better than I do." She pretended to frown at Michael.

He only laughed. "Isn't it rather the right explanation?" said he.

"Absolutely, I believe, where Francis is concerned. It's just what a child does, and he's so much less grown-up than he thinks he is."

"I'm glad you see that. It's no good taking him seriously."

"No. He told me that once." She reflected, momentarily grave. "I know what he meant. Poor Francis!"

"'Poor Francis!' indeed."

Celia had slipped to her knees beside her husband. She turned now, and looked up in his face. He met her look with perfect comprehension and gentleness.

"You're a little bit in love with him yourself, aren't you, Celia?" he said.

She nodded. They understood each other

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so absolutely. "Just a little," she agreed; and she put her cheek down against his hand.

"You don't mind his coming here again?"

"Oh *no*, I'm glad of it. I'm so awfully anxious he should do well, and he needs your advice. If I turned him away now because of my own nonsense . . ."

"I'm glad you see it in that way."

"You knew I wouldn't refuse to see any more of him, didn't you? You'd be the first to be vexed with me if I encouraged myself like that."

"Of course I should. Only . . . I don't like your being hurt."

"He won't hurt me badly, Michael dear. That was all got over five years ago, and you healed it for me. You're a bit of a soul-doctor, you know. . . . It was Francis said that of you, that day I met him again."

"Whatever I can do for you, my darling . . ." Then, after an interval of seriousness, "But you've been stealing my prescriptions. It's you that have cured Francis, really."

"Michael, that's adorable of you; but it's very untruthful."

"Not at all. Ask him."

"As if I didn't know how beautifully he can lie in the cause of politeness! I never believe anything Francis says to me now; though I sometimes pretend I do, for tactical reasons."

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"You are a fraudulent creature, Celia, and I am an unlucky victim to have married you."

"That reminds me. Are you going to let Francis marry Letty?"

"I didn't think he'd shown any inclination to do so." Michael had smiled reprovingly at his wife, but she was grave.

"Letty wants him very badly, Michael."

Letty's brother shook his head. "That isn't quite the same thing."

"I know it isn't." Celia sighed, then ventured, "Couldn't we make him?"

Her husband put his hand under her chin, and tilted her face up towards him. "Don't meddle, Celia. You'll only break hearts if you do."

"Shan't I prevent their being broken?"

"I don't think so. The heart you mean isn't very old yet. Let it grow a little."

"But Francis is so lonely."

"That's nearer the truth, and I'm sorry for it. He'd be better with a wife. Only . . he's a difficult man to please, and a hard one to manage. Letty's not the girl to take all his interest. And it's all or nothing with Francis. That's why he's wasted so much time."

"I know. If he'd found a woman who could understand him . . ."

"You're getting on to a conventional and

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dangerous road, Celia," he teased her. "Francis is not a conventional person, and the woman who could keep him interested all his life is yet to be found."

"I believe you understand him better than I do."

"Perhaps I'm a little that way myself. Only, I found the woman." He took her face between his hands. "If Francis had met you in time . . ."

She laughed very sweetly. "So he did. And didn't want me. Well, I was only myself then. I hadn't had your tuition. You've made me, you know, Michael."

"Sweetheart, you were perfect already."

Their hearts were very young still; they jested in the face of death. "Where should I have been if I hadn't met you, Celia?"

"Where Francis is. And yet you won't let me help him."

"Francis is a foolish fellow. Perhaps you're right about him, after all. Only . . . Letty's not you, you know."

"But she's your sister. Won't she finish our reform for us?"

"I'm not sure. She's heavy-handed, because she's young, and doesn't see how amusing life is. When she's been taught how to laugh . . ."

"Let Francis teach her. He knows a good deal about the subject."

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"Celia, you're rather a witch. You've found out his best quality."

"Why, that's not hard."

"Not to you, perhaps. Letty hasn't seen it."

"She soon would. She does love him, you know . . . poor Letty."

"She's not educated enough to conjugate the verb properly, Celia, in spite of college."

"I don't agree with you. Girls learn sooner than you think, and Francis is an experienced teacher. Remember, I was his pupil five years ago, and he was by no means a beginner then."

"And yet you want him to have Letty?"

She only hesitated a moment. Then she said, "I don't think he'll make her less happy for having learnt the way to set about it."

"At the hands of other women?"

"Well, it's the only school." She became grave. "It hasn't hurt him, you know. I'd trust him with her. And he can be very gentle when he chooses."

"Will he choose?"

"I don't promise. But may I try?"

"I won't prevent you. Perhaps I trust Francis too. And I'm too fond of him and Letty both to mind their being happy together, if they can. But I'm a little frightened . . ."

"Don't be, Michael. It's against our gospel, and you'd blame me for it. Think the best

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of both of them. I want them to be as happy as we are."

"Isn't that impossible?"

She kissed him.

"And what about you in all this, dear?"

She met his look. "It'll be the best thing in the world for me. Francis fortunate will lose all his attraction. It's only because he needs help so badly, and doesn't know it . . ." There were tears in her eyes, but she laughed them away. "*You're* not going to take me seriously now, are you?"

"Didn't I take you — more or less — for laughter and tears both?"

"That's a new version of the service, and I like it. Put it into the next play, Michael. . . . But it was you who taught me to laugh. I didn't know how before." She was not laughing as she spoke.

"You'll remember the lesson?"

"I'll remember . . . always." She clung to him, thinking of the time when she must laugh alone. "Michael, it'll be so hard."

"You mustn't think that. I should know, and want to come back."

"If only you did . . ."

"Not allowed, Celia darling. We must keep the rules," with an attempt at a smile.

"It'll be so long."

"You don't know. It mayn't be. And at

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least we've had our good time. Let's be grateful, Celia. No one else can ever have been allowed to be so happy."

"I'll try not. Only . . . if we could have grown old together . . ."

"Celia, don't . . ." But after a moment he was brave again, jesting even. "Who knows? A cracked pot lasts longest. You've not got rid of me yet. Don't cross your bridges before you come to them."

"You're v-very proverbial to-night," with a valiant effort to follow him.

"I must get over it before Francis comes. There's no one else so severe on hackneyed remarks, is there? What do you think his speeches 'll be like?"

She could smile over that. "I don't really know. We shall see. I think I must go and hear one."

"I shall go and help with the whole thing. Don't contradict, Celia. I'm quite determined. I said I should spend my holiday getting a man into Parliament. Besides, if Francis is going to be member for the division where my stepfather lives, I must see that his views are orthodox. I can't have the dear old man skocked by anything too Socialistic. . . . What fun it'll be!"

"Won't it?"

"The best rag I ever was in. Oh, I'll have

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my revenge on Francis to-morrow. All the times he's been superior . . . called me an enthusiast and a fanatic . . . played at being so detached. Francis a Liberal candidate! . . . I've got the last laugh, after ten years, and I'm going to enjoy it."

The interview that took place on the next day was not quite as thus described, but it was perhaps nearer to Michael's actual expectations. Harland travelled by a train that arrived at midday, and he came out to Marshdikes about two o'clock. The day was fine and warm, though it was the end of October, and both windows of Michael's room were open, letting in the sea-wind and the sunshine. Michael flung all his papers to one side, and sprang up. "You're here, then? Has Celia seen you?"

"No, I came to you first." Harland found a little difficulty in speaking.

"Good. She's more unselfish than I thought she would be. She said she should lie in wait for you on the road. We had a tremendous quarrel over who should congratulate first. But I told her that she'd had the telephone message, and this was my privilege." He was pushing forward a chair as he spoke.

"Your privilege, certainly," said Harland, trying to speak as they had always done, "since it's your fault that I'm in my present difficulties at all."

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Michael looked as if he had been paid a compliment. "That's excellent. Tell me all about 'em."

"It's what I came for."

"Well, I know nothing, except that you mean to follow Grainger."

"If they'll have me." Michael made no comment. "Old Quatermaine wrote two days ago. I telephoned about it last night, when I heard the news. I'm to go down on Sunday. There'll be about three weeks to turn in, I expect." He ran on with such details, putting off the actual words that must come, when he could bear to speak them, and see Michael's face change.

"Celia's awfully glad."

"That's kind of her."

"Don't try politeness on us, Francis. We're not constituents, only old friends. Develop your professional manner later. Who else *should* be glad about it?" Harland thought that his charming, mocking voice had more than a tone of his wife's at times. She would have spoken exactly thus. Oddly enough, this was the thought that made clearness imperative.

"Michael . . ." said Harland abruptly, stopping the flow of words.

"What?"

"You haven't been told why I changed my mind about this business."

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"It's enough for me that you *have* changed it. . . . Well, I may have hoped that it was due to my continual advice, or Celia's persuasions. But if you must undeceive me . . ."

"I met Dick Johnstone last night."

Michael's hovering smile did not change when he understood. "Oh, you mustn't let Dick come over you with his professional theories. I don't let him frighten me, and I've more grounds for believing him than you have."

Harland did not or could not reply.

"I understand," said Michael, grave at last. "Well, if I've had that effect on you, perhaps it's worth while my being rather useless otherwise." He smiled again, with an effect of showing the humour of the situation. "It's an annoying thing, this having to be careful of myself, as if I were an old woman. I'm afraid Dick and Celia find me rather a bad patient. But now you're going to do the work I like for me, I shan't mind so much. You'll come to me for advice, won't you? You needn't take it unless you like. But I'm an old political hand. I've been in the thick of half a dozen elections, before I took to scribbling about 'em. You'll enjoy yourself no end. There's nothing else goes to your head in the same way. I'm coming to hear you make your first speech. Dick or no Dick,

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I couldn't bear to be out of it. Funny thing, isn't it, that you should take up the game instead of me? We didn't plan it this way at Oxford."

"Not this way," agreed Harland. His voice failed on the words. "Michael," said he again, "if only you had told me before . . ."

It was after this that they talked seriously together.

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IX

SEQUEL TO A CONVERSION

LATER, Harland went a couple of hundred yards down the road to the canal. He knew that he would find Celia in an old and favourite place there. He turned by the bridge, with its tarred and blackened sluice-gates. The disused and stagnant canal ran each way, very shallow, full of weeds. There were trees on each side of it, that were golden now, and had lost half their leaves; the water was golden too, in part from their reflection, in part from the leaves that had fallen into it. Celia sat in her old place under the bank, where the sunshine rested and the wind could not come to her. She turned her head at the sound of his footsteps, and stretched out her hand to him. He sat down beside her.

"What's all this about your becoming a Cabinet Minister?" said she, laughing merrily.

And to her he spoke at once, as he had not been brave enough to speak to her husband. "Dick Johnstone told me last night about Michael. So I had to give in, you see."

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She gave a little cry of pain and pity together, and, bending over him, "Oh! Francis, Francis dear, then you understand now?" she said.

"I understand," he replied, looking up at her with a trouble that brought tears to her eyes.

"Oh! why should it happen to him, of all people?" she cried.

He could not answer her. It was she who, after a moment, comforted him. "We mustn't be cowards. Michael's brave. And I promised Doctor Johnstone that I wouldn't worry him. This news of yours will please him so much . . . Michael, I mean. Have you been telling him all about it?" Her voice was almost steady again. Harland respected it.

"He's been telling me, you know, really. Professional advice . . . it's very necessary for a young man of my inexperience. I shall make endless mistakes. Michael has promised to come and help me. Will you do the same?"

She laughed tremulously. "Of course I will. Fancy you as a politician, Francis! What sort of speeches will you make to your electors? Dreadfully academic, I expect, and full of complicated epigrams."

"Exactly! Pouring out upon their devoted heads the carefully assorted impromptus of a

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lifetime, as the saying was . . ." He encouraged her to talk nonsense, knowing that she would steady herself best in that way. She was almost recovered by this time.

"I wouldn't miss the campaign for worlds," she said. "Only . . . it's not much good your having my advice. You never take it."

"I admit that I have seldom done so in the past. But I am willing to reform."

She glanced sharply at him, and her tone veiled seriousness as she said, "Honestly, Francis?"

He replied, "As honestly as is possible with me. I told you I had reformed."

"I wonder if you meant it?"

"Why not? What's the use of stopping halfway down the hill? Michael's fairly launched me to destruction with this promise about Manifold. What do you want out of me, Celia? For now's your chance."

She leant eagerly towards him. He glanced up at her as an animal does, shyly and sidelong, yet with friendship in the depths of his merry, golden-brown eyes. He was like an animal that fears the trap, whilst circling curiously about the hunter. "Will you hurt me if I come near enough to be touched?" he seemed to question.

"I wish you *would* be advised," Celia said.

He lay at her feet on the grass. "It's very

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foolish of you, Celia dear. You won't really be pleased if I give in to you. But I'm half inclined for it, just in order to show you your ignorance of me. And also because Michael's made half a fool of me to-day, and I'm not yet recovered. Suppose I let you finish the job . . ." He smiled at her. "What will you do to me, Celia? Send me off to get married, I suppose."

"Please, Francis," she answered gravely.

He lay back, appearing to change his mood. "I don't think I like you serious, Celia," he observed. "Laughter suits you best, as I've told you before. And you make me feel uncomfortable, you and that husband of yours."

"And Marshdikes. Don't forget Marshdikes."

"I get no chance. What with Marshdikes hunting me into dreams, and you hunting me into matrimony, and Michael hunting me into my constituency . . ."

"What's the matter with the constituency, Francis?"

He became abruptly serious. "There's only one thing the matter with it. But that's serious enough, you know. Letty lives there."

A little pause followed. Then Celia, smiling to herself, laid her hand on his shoulder as if to console him for something. "Are you

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afraid that she'll come and heckle you at all your meetings about the suffrage question?"

"She's sure to, isn't she?" agreed Harland whimsically. "Unless I square her first . . ."

"I think you'd better."

"And then she'll come and sit on my platforms, and make speeches for me, which will be almost worse."

Harland put up his hand, and touched the reproving, caressing hand that he could not see as he lay. "Out with it, Celia. I suppose there's no escape for me?"

"Will you really, Francis?"

"I don't take it at all kindly from Celia Dittany, you know. After all, it's not two months since I said that I wanted her and none other."

"But she's not on the market now. And Letty's the only person she can spare you to."

"Thank you. I could wish there had been no exception to the rule, though."

"Your wishes are so unbounded. You must learn to take the second best. It can be a very pleasant thing, really."

"You can afford to say so. You've the best." He interrupted her a little harshly.

"I shan't have it always, Francis."

They were both very quiet for a moment. Then, "Celia . . ." and the tightening of his fingers on her hand until they almost hurt her.

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"It's all right, Francis," she said. "There's no forgiveness between you and me. You lose what I do when he goes."

"No other woman would have been generous enough to say that."

She could laugh even now, with the tears in her eyes. "Is Francis Harland also among my prophets? Oh, but you're so much too late, my dear!" And then, repentant, "Never too late, if only I can help you."

"I'll go to Letty to-morrow," he promised her.

"I'm so glad. She *is* what you want."

"I don't know. But if I'm what she wants, it's as good from one point of view."

"You won't find your second best as bad as you think, I'm sure."

"Perhaps not. It's a sign of advancing years to be content with it, anyhow. And I believe I must be getting to the marrying age. I certainly found that house of mine very dark and solitary when I went back to it last week."

"Let Letty brighten it up for you."

He began to laugh, ruefully and gently. "Will she paint over my oak panels, and give me a Louis Seize drawing-room? I've never had a drawing-room yet. But all good things come to an end. I can see Letty as a political hostess. She'll fill my house with people who talk for their living. Think of Letty receiving

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the Labour party in a diamond tiara! I like her so much better playing golf."

"She'll do the other thing just as well, Francis. She'll be a tremendous help to you."

"I'm afraid she will. She'll make me an Under-Secretary before I know where I am. And I don't like the game. It's a tragic, futile game, and it's bound to make me unhappy. I should have done better to keep out of it altogether. I never meant to come in." He turned on his side, and stared across the canal. "There's only one person in the world who could have fooled me into it," Celia heard him say. Lying down again, with an effect of disdaining his own emotion, he added, "And that person . . . isn't you."

"I know it's not," she answered, unoffended. "You refused to listen to me on the subject a long time ago. But don't pose, Francis! You'll enjoy it well enough when you begin."

"Like the eels, who get used to everything, even skinning." She laughed at this. "But all the same, Michael's made a fool of me. He wants me to revive the quaint old custom of sincerity in politics. And I've promised to try. And now you come and want me to make a marriage of inconvenience; and I'm going to try that too. I must be getting very feeble-minded in my old age."

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"Even that's an improvement."

"Thank you." They laughed together. Harland, however, appeared to become reflective. "It's curious how things turn out. I shouldn't a year ago . . . have believed anyone who told me that I was destined to Letty. If I weren't reluctant to voice a truism, I should remark that the women we love are very seldom the women we marry."

"That's worse than a truism, it's a paradox, and so forbidden." She became more serious. "Why can't you love her, Francis?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "God knows. Why can't we all be perfectly virtuous, and strong, and happy? These things aren't a matter of choice. Letty's adorable, and I see it. I'd do anything else in the world for her. I'd do this if I could, for my own sake as much as for hers."

"You'll learn."

"I don't know. She's too young to teach me, I think, Celia. And . . . she can't laugh. And I can't be serious for two minutes together."

"Don't I know that?"

"Yet you've seen me serious more often than any other woman in the world. You understand me. So does Michael. Letty never will. But I'll do my best for her, I

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promise. There's no particular reason for her to find me out. She's only a kitten with her eyes shut at present. I'm too fond of her to open them. She shall keep them shut all her life if I can manage it for her." There was a great deal of kindness in his voice. Celia heard it, and it satisfied her. She leant towards him.

"You'll make her happy, Francis. And she'll grow up, you know. There's a great deal in her that you haven't seen. All this exaggeration at present . . . politics . . . suffrage . . . independence . . . she'll grow out of it. She's only trying to find her feet. She's rather lost at home . . . hasn't anything special to do . . . can't fill up her time. She thinks her societies are worth while. They're not, of course, the way she sets about them, and she's beginning to feel that. When she was here she told me as much . . . showed me that she's getting tired, though she doesn't know it. What she wants is someone to look after. She's made that way, really. She ought to get married. And I think she'd better marry you."

"Well . . . since she wants to . . . But how do you come to understand her so well?" He was quite gentle over the picture that Celia had drawn for him, and she congratulated herself.

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She answered, "Because I was so very like her, years ago."

"You, Celia?"

"Really I was." She sat facing her recollections. "Before I knew you . . . and when I was getting to know you first. I believe all girls are the same. Dreaming . . . restless . . . discontented . . . hungry for life and afraid of it. I couldn't find just what Letty can't find . . . something to do that seemed worth while . . . someone who wanted me for myself. I felt unnecessary . . . so very useless. Men don't know that state of mind, do they? They've always got work to do, and they seem able to persuade themselves that it counts. I suppose it does, if it helps them to fill up their time. Women have so much spare time." She paused, looking across the water. "At least, I had. It's over now, thank Heaven. First I got my work, and then I got Michael. And things came right. Every minute's worth while now. I don't know how it would be if I were left alone again." She drew a long breath. "But I'd try . . . I'd always try to go on in the same way. I've had my lesson of how to see things. I believe I could remember it."

"If you could teach it to me . . ." said Harland under his breath.

She came back to him from an infinite

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distance. "Oh, Francis, you'll learn. You're teaching yourself already. Some day you'll get it, if you keep your courage. You began by knowing how to laugh. You hadn't far to go. Won't you teach my Letty for me? She's further off it than you, because she's so young. She hasn't a glad heart. She doesn't understand. But she soon will if you're gentle with her. Be good to her, Francis; she's my own youth to me! . . ."

"Celia, dear, what *is* your tremendous age? Twenty-six or twenty-seven?" He teased away her doubts, very gently.

"But so much has happened to me. I've laughed so often . . . shed so many tears . . . You understand?"

"I know, my dear, I know. Don't be afraid about Letty. She shan't have any more troubles than she insists on for herself."

"I'm afraid she may insist on a good many," admitted Celia whimsically.

"Ah, well, she's blessedly young. She likes to think that she has a very bad time. I hope experience may never teach her how fortunate she has really been."

Celia smiled, but added one word: "Don't be too hard on her. Her troubles mean as much to her as ours do to us. They're very real. And she hasn't learnt how to take them. Now you and I . . ."

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"Can feel quite superior?"

"Yes, we've been talking like grandparents. Well, you began it. You'll have to learn a new vocabulary before you go to her to-morrow."

"To-morrow . . ." repeated Harland.

He dedicated a moment to his thoughts, which perhaps held a certain contrast between what had been and what must be. Then, resolutely, he stood up, and began to collect Celia's belongings. "My train . . . " he said. She cried, "Oh, Francis, I'd quite forgotten," and sprang to her feet. He noticed, not for the first time, how swiftly she moved. "Energetic creature," observed he. "Well, the reign of energy begins for me from to-day, I suppose. Letty doesn't like idleness, does she?" He picked up the last red cushion.

Celia walked arm in arm with him towards the house.

"You and Michael have done a considerable amount of work between you this afternoon," remarked Harland. "You may congratulate yourselves."

"We shall. It *was* rather a feat, wasn't it?" She chuckled in reminiscent fashion.

"What's amusing you?"

"Nothing much. The general contrast and improbability . . . you married, and in Parliament . . . myself as a match-making sister-in-law . . . Michael reforming a criminal

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of thirty odd years. And all the while we're such quiet, everyday, uninfluential people. I don't know how it's come to this."

"You are," said Harland, "the most dangerous people I know."

She said, "I don't know if that was intended for a compliment. But I take it as the best I ever had."

They walked on in friendly silence. Marshdikes was close above them, it seemed to smile upon them. The afternoon was quiet, warm, and hazy; the road was strewn with fallen leaves. "What an adorable house it is!" reflected Harland, aloud. "I was afraid of it once. But I don't think it minds me now." He glanced sidelong at its mistress, with his bright, charming look of apology for a foolish remark.

Celia pressed his arm. "Of course not. You're forgiven now. You never need be afraid to come here again."

Michael was at the gate. He spoke of everyday, cheerful matters, the time of the train, and the details of the election. "I'm coming to take my holiday speech-making," said he. "I finished the last scene but one of *Harlequin* yesterday. Another week 'll see it out. And then for our fight." He laughed in anticipation. Harland laughed too; they were schoolboys together.

"Here's the car," said Celia. "Off with

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you! You've only fourteen minutes. You and Jimmy 'll have to road-hog for all you're worth."

Harland made no good-byes. Everything had been said; they understood him and he them,—the world was young again. "Till next week," said he, and was whirled away in a cloud of dust.

Michael and Celia Dittany stood together, and watched the car round the bend of the road. "So *that's* all right," said Michael, with a sigh of divine contentment.

"All right," repeated Celia Dittany, and kissed her husband.

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X

THE WORKING WOMAN

FRANCIS HARLAND reached town late. He did nothing of importance that evening, unless a little serious thinking be important. But next morning he rang up a certain number in the Victoria Exchange.

"I want to talk to you," he informed the clear, somewhat impatient voice that demanded his business. "Will you come to tea with me?"

Letty refused, which disconcerted him a little. But after some persuasion she consented to his escort home from her work.

"Five o'clock, or half-past. I shan't be ready before. We're up to our ears to-day."

"On a Saturday! You should never take yourself as seriously as that. Invaluable as your work is, it surely cannot justify . . ." He began to laugh, for Letty had cut him off. "If she only knew what Celia and I are going to do to her . . ." he reflected. Then he became graver. "What will she say when she knows?" But he did not interest himself in

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the question; for, after all, though Letty might take the disclosure in a hundred ways, there could be no doubt as to her answer. She had given it already, poor girl! It was just that which made the whole situation. "Everything comes to her who waits," said Harland, a trifle cynically. "Letty's despised methods have given her what she wanted." But afterwards he was ashamed of the thought, and put it from him. "What business have I to criticise her? She's giving me far more than she'll ever get back. And I've promised to be good to her." At five o'clock, then, or a little later, he went to look for a wife. . . .

Letty, as has been implied, was a modern young woman. Her parents, old-fashioned people both, lived on their estates in the Manifold division, and patronised their neighbours. Their daughter had other activities. She liked the stir of events; she was a good platform-speaker, and an energetic worker on committees. Her mother was disturbed by these things, her father amused. "Keeps her out of other mischief," said he. "She can't do any harm, if she doesn't do much good. And it's less expensive than a dancing mania. So long as she doesn't elect to be a hospital-nurse, and go about catching every disease under the sun,"—Letty had earlier shown a disposition for this kind of amusement,—"she can make

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a fool of herself on platforms if she likes," said Colonel Underhill. "There doesn't seem to be any prejudice against it nowadays." So Letty went her independent way, and was the happier for employment. At present she was on a long visit to an aunt in town, and spent most of her time in an office in Westminster, typing official correspondence.

Francis Harland found her there at a quarter after five. She was addressing envelopes with great rapidity, in a schoolgirl hand that was the least official thing about her; and she was rather untidily dressed. Harland, who noticed these matters, had lectured her before on the subject, though to-day he refrained. On the table at her elbow were the remains of a perfunctory meal—two thick slices of bread-and-jam on a cracked plate, a brown teapot, and a glass sugar-bowl. Letty had inky fingers, and a curl of her hair was loose on her cheek. She looked ridiculously young, and very tired. Harland repented of many things when he saw her.

"All by yourself?" said he, shutting the door. "What's become of that capable female who was here the last time I came?"

"Janet Wade's just gone," said Letty, pushing back her hair from her eyes. "I'm finishing these off. Don't interrupt for five minutes, please."

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She fell to again, hunting an address through a Directory, her pen-holder between her lips.

Harland, smiling faintly, turned away and walked to the window. He looked out on his own shadow across Bridge Street to the Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. The lamps were being lighted, and the evening was blue and golden. He heard the noise of London coming up to him, and he thought of his future.

Letty pushed back her chair. "That's all. I'm going home now."

Harland turned round, and came and took the chair beside her. "I rather want to talk to you, Letty. Here's better than walking across the Park, isn't it? Since you won't come to tea."

Letty propped her chin on her hands, elbows on the table. The light from the gas overhead made her seem very pale. "I've had tea. What's the matter?" She spoke, as she sometimes did, with a curious abruptness.

Harland began slowly. "A good many things. I've seen Michael and Celia again. And I've heard from people up in the North. . . . You know about Grainger? And so . . . Well, perhaps the chief thing to interest a political dame like you is that I'm going to stand for Manifold, if it'll take me."

Letty did not move. That was her way when you told her a thing suddenly. She sat

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quite quiet, and thought it over. Harland looked at her. He had a sudden wild impulse to put out his hand and tuck away the little curl behind her ear. Instead, he inquired, "Will you come and canvass for me, Letty? I shall want a great deal of help."

"You will," Letty returned. She nibbled one of the inky fingers reflectively. "You'll be a rotten candidate. You always talk like an ice-machine." Harland laughed at this. "I've never seen you enthusiastic over anything. You think about your phrases all the time. I've often wanted to run a knife into you, and see if I couldn't make you change your expression." She flung her words at him. Her face was tilted back and fore-shortened, so that she looked from under lowered, disdainful lids. "They'll be fools if they take you," she said. "And you'll never win the seat. You're not the man the place wants. You're no good. You can't catch fire, and you've never done a day's work in your life."

"That's true," answered Harland gravely. There was, nevertheless, a very faint touch of colour in his cheeks, a sign with him that he was either angry or hurt. "You're beginning to understand me even better than I do myself," was all that he gave by way of reproach.

Letty coloured more than he did, and for the first time avoided his eyes.

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Said Harland, choosing his words with even more of the criticised deliberation as he approached his difficult errand: "May I contradict one of your statements, Letty? I admit that I have never done a day's work in my life. I admit, moreover, that I have refused to show you any of my enthusiasms. But . . ." His restraint gave way. "You say I can't catch fire. You don't know. This thing's going to be all the world to me. I've been fighting against it for a year. Now I've given in . . . Michael's broken me . . . I'm done for." He stopped short. Letty's grey eyes were staring at him. He regained his normal manner, and said lightly, "Manifold 'll have to take me and my carpet-bag together. Such eagerness must not be wasted. You'll see what sort of a candidate I'll make."

She answered without moving, "I didn't know you cared at all about this sort of work. Why did you never tell me?"

"Because . . ." He got no further. "There isn't any reason, dear. I don't tell many people my dreams. They laugh, you know. Or else they yawn."

"But I shouldn't have done either." The dark eyebrows drew together in their puzzled, weary frown.

Harland was touched and ashamed. He gave an explanation that came nearer to the truth.

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"I never knew myself till lately. The day before yesterday, in fact. That's when Michael made me into a fool." He knew that she was ignorant of Michael's danger. Therefore he kept his tone very light.

She thought that he spoke of some actual argument, and was satisfied.

"Michael's an awfully good politician," said she. "I should like to run *him* for a seat."

"You'd have a worthy object for your endeavours then, wouldn't you? I'd work for him myself like a slave."

Letty nodded in approval.

"Will you work for me, though, Letty, since I'm all the candidate there is? I can't get on without you."

Letty studied him very gravely. He wondered what thoughts lay behind those innocent eyes.

"Will you come, Letty?" It was not the decisive question, but it seemed so to him.

She replied, after a long moment, "Yes. They want me back at home. I'll come and see what I can do."

He felt as if he had been given his answer. Going on, he asked, "Is that a promise?"

"Of course. Doesn't it satisfy you?" Her eyebrows rose a little.

"Not quite." He wondered afterwards why, at this moment, he had remembered Celia

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Dittany. "You see, I want you to promise that you'll marry me as well."

. . . . . .

He thought that she had sat there, looking at him, for more years than he could remember. "You understand, don't you, Letty dear? . . . Your hair's all over your eyes. Let's put it straight." The brown curl was between his awkward fingers, as he had dreamed. "That's better. When you're making speeches on platforms you'll have to be very tidy, you know." He laughed at her and at himself, in the way she could never understand. "Letty darling, you mustn't cry."

She whispered, "All this summer, you hurt me so. Why did you never tell me?"

"Was it so bad? You shouldn't have taken me seriously. I wasn't worth it."

"Could I help that? Oh! all this time . . . remembering you . . . waiting for you . . . hating you. . . . If you had known what it was like! . . ."

"You poor child! . . ."

. . . . . .

A little later she said, "Why should it frighten me to be so happy?"

"I don't know. Not because you're still afraid of me, I hope?"

She looked down. "I might be, mightn't I? I shall always hate you a little for this summer."

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"Will you, Letty?"

"Haven't I the right?" She glanced up at him with quick rebellion.

He could not justify himself easily, without hurting her pride. Instead, he answered, "You'll always be able to punish me, Letty."

"Shall I? That's just what I want to be sure about."

She was jealous and uncertain; he perfectly sure of himself, even to the faintest of smiles, discreetly hidden. Because Letty was so sweet and young, and so adorably foolish. "If you treat me as you did when I came in half an hour ago . . ."

"You deserved it."

"Did I? I said what I came to say in spite of it. Am I forgiven now?"

Letty showed him downcast lashes and a smooth cheek, turned away from him.—"Am I?"—The averted lips smiled in spite of themselves.—"Letty, I've only just discovered that dimple of yours. Why isn't it there always? I love you to laugh, you know. Promise me you will sometimes." He turned her head towards him, and saw the laughter come as he had fancied it. "Letty, do you know that you're very like Michael?"

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me yet."

"I could find a whole volume of new things

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to say to you. But the old things are best. Say you love me, Letty."

"Francis, why were you so unkind to me when we were down at Marshdikes together?"

"Won't you forget to remember that? It was my last revolt."

"Against me?"

"Against you. Against Michael, and Marshdikes, and everything."

Letty did not understand. "Michael didn't know, did he?" she cried, and drew away from Harland.

He said, a little perplexed, "I don't think so. Why do you look like that?"

"I couldn't bear to think anyone had guessed."

"Why? Are you ashamed of me?"

She turned away her head. "No. Of myself."

He was quick to repair a false step. "Letty, it's I who should be ashamed. You've only been your adorable self. Don't think anything else. Why, Michael will probably," with a laugh, "refuse to give up his precious and only sister, when he does hear the news. He'll say I'm not good enough for her."

Letty smiled, shyly audacious, like a child. "No more you are. But I'll do my best with you."

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"What are you going to make out of me, sweetheart?"

She told him, with great solemnity. Her elbows were on the table again, her chin on her hands. She was flushed and eager as she expounded her plans. Harland watched her, regretfully, tenderly amused. She knew so little, and thought she knew so much. Would she learn from him? Did he want her to learn? She was more to him as she was. . . . ("Don't," said Letty, moving her head. "I can't help it if my hair *is* untidy, after working all day.")

Harland said, "You're going to make a very strenuous person of me, I'm afraid."

"I want you to take things seriously. You will, won't you?"

"I don't know, my dearest. I've grown out of being able to be very solemn. Do it for me. You're so divinely young. You'll do it better." He sat on the table, looking down at her. His eyes were very merry.

Letty said, unchanging, "Am I young? You've hurt me so much that sometimes I've felt as old . . ."

"As time itself? Letty . . ." She let herself be comforted slowly. He saw that he must treat her very gently as yet. "Letty, when will you come and begin?"

She promised to follow him to Manifold in

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two or three days. She would not have anyone but her own people and the Dittanys told the news until after the election. Harland yielded the point, which seemed to trouble her, and made her talk about their campaign.

"How long shall we have? Francis, you must get in . . . you must. I'll work the whole day for you."

"All your life too, Letty?" He took one of her hands in his. "It'll be uphill work, I'm afraid." His tender, pitying affection for her came out clearly enough in his voice. "You're doing a thing that's sure to hurt you, my dear. And perhaps you'll wish you hadn't some day. What do you think?"

Letty's fingers had been restless in his at first. But now they lay quiet, like a bird that has been tamed. He looked at her, and she at him, with perfect steadiness, and "I'm not afraid," said Letty.

It was then that he kissed her. Her lips were as cool and fresh as those of a child; she held up her face no less innocently. There were tears in her eyes, but they did not fall, because Harland kissed them away. She stood quite quiet, saying nothing. There was a smile about her mouth, as if she dreamed.

He told her that he must take her home. She pinned on her hat before the cracked

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looking-glass, and allowed Harland to wrap her in her big coat. He fastened the collar of it close up to her throat. They went to the door together. She had her hand through his arm, just like a confiding child that will go anywhere with those it loves. "I used to think this was an ugly little room," said she. "But I shan't now . . . never again."

"I shall be jealous of it in the future," Harland returned. "You won't be allowed to hide here any more."

Letty laughed. "I shan't want to. I shall have my work to do at home." Her voice was very sweet.

"I understand," said Harland aloud.

"What?" queried Letty.

"Why, you for the moment. How long will it last, I wonder?" There was momentary bitterness here.

"I'm very easy to understand," said Letty, against his shoulder.

"Shall I find you so? I'll pray for clear eyes." He put out the light, and they went away together.

They walked up through St. James's Park. It was about six o'clock on a frosty evening. The sky was the colour of a sapphire, the trees very black against it. From the Bridge the water was golden and rose-red, with lights on the farther shore. The Palace looked un-

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substantial behind them. The noise of the streets was distant enough to become music; footsteps close at hand sounded very loud on the frosty ground. Harland and Letty Underhill walked in silence, she because of her happiness, he because of his thoughts. At the door of her aunt's house in Chester Street she dismissed him, begging for the evening to herself. "Don't come to see me before you go to-morrow. I'd rather you didn't. Write to me. I'll come after you very soon. Good-night, Francis . . . good-night."

He walked back the same way by himself. The moon was coming up, and hung in the branches of the trees like a great lantern. The air was very cold, though there was no wind. Harland listened to his own footsteps, and thought of many things.

When he got back to his house in Westminster he sat down and composed a letter to Celia Dittany, telling her his news. He sealed it, and posted it himself before he dined. Only as he began the address did it occur to him that this was the first time he had ever written to her.

Next day he went down to Manifold.

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XI

ADVENTURES WITH A CARPET-BAG

THE Manifold parliamentary division was in the north of England. It had a small electorate, and though it preserved the name of the Manifold district it had been cut down by redistribution to little more than the town of Greywall and its immediate suburbs. Harland's own house was not even in his constituency, technically speaking, nowadays. His uncle had found it seven miles from Greywall, beyond Kingsfold village, in the agricultural district of Kingsfold, which had always been under Conservative influence. Young Harland's Liberalism would have no market there, as he very well knew. He had heard Letty Underhill deplore the farmers' prejudices often enough, and had teased her for it. That had been in the careless, untroubled days. . . .

In Greywall there was a chance of something different. It had been Conservative too in its time. But late years had changed the sleepy market town. The factories had invaded it; it had become dirty, noisy, and

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wide awake. Also it had doubled in size. The castle had been turned into a museum, and there were trams in the market-place, among the apple-stalls. The factory chimneys were so tall and numerous that the air was always full of smoke. It made a heavy fog on wet days, and on fine ones great rolling clouds, high overhead and creamy against the blue. And with the change of the town the people had changed also. In the old days they had believed what was told them, and disliked novelties. With a new century they became only too eager for what was strange; they learnt to question, read, and think for themselves. Charles Grainger's last opponent, a briefless young barrister with a turn for speech-making, actually ran him within four hundred votes of failure at the general election. All these things were signs of the times, and troubled the old-fashioned. Greywall was disturbed when its member died. . . .

And, on the Sunday after, young Harland travelled down to Greywall. The journey was long, and he occupied it with thinking of the future. Letty Underhill was very little in his thoughts, but her brother occupied many of them, and next after Michael came the recollection of Greywall and the Manifold country, as both dwelt in Harland's mind. He had visited the place once or twice in his uncle's

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time, but had not known how clearly it remained in his memory. Returning to it, and thinking of it as a battleground where he might justify himself before his friend, "Why did I never come back before?" he thought. "Did Michael know I should feel this? I dare say. It would be like him to build on memories that I never knew I had. Shall I go mad about the place, in the end, and wallow in local patriotism? Michael, you've made a fool of me in earnest this time. If only I could have escaped you!"

He stared out of the window. They were come into the Manifold country by now, and its low hills were about the railway. The cold of the night before in London had meant snow here. All the fields were white and grey. The hedges were black between them. The clouds were breaking up for sunset; the world was cold and very still, empty of life, as it seemed. Harland watched landmarks that he had forgotten come into sight and into his memory. Being alone, he confessed to feeling. "Did I want to escape?" thought Francis Harland.

He came to Greywall late. The sky was full of melted gold, and the hills were blue against it. Greywall, in the valley, lay north and south under the castle rock; the smoke of its chimneys went up to the sunset. The river

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ran in loops of fire, the snow on the eastern hills was flushed to rose-colour. Harland let down the window of his carriage, and breathed the air, which was intensely and piercingly cold. The train ran across the iron bridge over the river and into the main station.

There was, for some reason or other, a great crowd, and Harland went unrecognised. He made his way out, jostled on every side, and deafened by the noises of the place. All this did not displease him. He was glad to hear the Greywall accent again, to know himself among those who seemed his own people. "All sentiment," he told himself contemptuously. "I don't belong here by any right that these men will acknowledge. I'm as much of a carpet-bagger as the last man. They'll be fools if they take me." But he smiled even as he forced himself to these reflections. The sense of home-coming was so strong that he could not put it away from him.

He found his car waiting, and drove through the town. The roofs were still edged in places with snow, the Gothic of St. Luke's Church in particular was accentuated by a weight of snow on crocket and finial. The castle was black up against the sunset, like a building that has been gutted by fire. The market was empty and dark, and the weekday toadstool crop of booths was missing. Harland

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was sharply disappointed, then laughed at himself for his own childishness. He could see the market in all its fascination next day. He looked up at the Town Hall as he drove by, and his eye was caught by a certain window with a balcony. He wondered what result would be announced from it in a few weeks' time.

He drove through the old part of the town. Here were quiet, Georgian streets, narrow and planted with trees. The houses were very tall behind them. A few lamps were lighted in the windows; the quarter was deserted and full of echoes. Beyond it came the new town and the factories. These were silent also, because of the day. Harland looked up at the walls, the great chimneys, and closed gates. He felt like a man who sees his ground the day before a battle. He was elate, yet sober, and full of interest, mixed with something not unlike reverence. He wondered what would be the end of the fight.

He was taken out into the country; he saw the white fields again, and the blue shadows across them. The moon that he had watched with Letty was up by now, and her light mixed with the circles of light from the lamps on the car. Harland shivered, not only with cold, though the frost was heavy. He lay back, staring at the trees on the bank above the

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road. Their branches were black against a pale sky, empty of cloud.

The road twisted; there was a gate, and the park, hoary in the moonlight, and then the house. It stood white and lonely; there were no lamps in its windows—it did not greet its master's return. Yet his heart—a thing forgotten—stirred at the sight of it; he found that he remembered it as if he had spent his childhood there. He went in, and traversed familiar rooms; the touch of the oak hand-rail, as he climbed the great staircase, was friendly. He stood before the fire in his own room, warming his stiff hands; and, "Michael," said he, under his breath, "you've won." Now he thought of Letty. And he wondered how she would like his house when she lived there.

Next day he was formally chosen to be candidate. He sat in the library in the evening, and went to bed at midnight, having composed his election address, a letter to Letty Underhill, another to her parents, and one to Michael Dittany. This last was, however, very short. It said merely: "Trapped, thanks to you! But I love the place already. When are you coming to help me?"

After this hostilities began. The Conservative association chose a certain Major Carron, retired, as their candidate. The town hoardings blossomed out into red and yellow, and

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dates were fixed for the nomination and polling days. In due course came Harland's first meeting. It was to take place in a village ten miles away, and was a mere preliminary to an important meeting in Greywall next day. ("Get your nerves over where it doesn't matter," had been Michael's advice to Harland, and he had taken it.) He dined a car-load of men beforehand: Quatermaine, the chairman; young Doctor Cassilis; Colonel Underhill, who cared little for politics, but was anxious to see his future son-in-law a member; and the election agent, a pessimist with a professional contempt for Harland the amateur. He spent dinner urging upon his candidate the necessity for conciliating Skinner, Socialist and leader of the men at the Greywall works. Harland nodded absently to each remark. He was more than a trifle nervous, though he would not have owned it.

Dinner—an unseasonable meal—had to be over by half-past six. Then came the long drive in the dark, and the arrival at the village school. The five of them went in by a back way and on to the platform. And Harland heard, for the first time in his life, the sound that is like no other—the welcoming cheer of a crowd. It affected him as a blow in the face might have done; he was dazed and breathed quickly, the room was dark to

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him for a moment. His nervousness became something like terror; he thought that he could not go on with his task. It was impossible that he should repeat this emotion. He must get away before he was detected as a speechless coward. . . . And then he thought of Michael, and was quiet again.

. . . He found himself in a chair at Quatermaine's side. Quatermaine was standing up and speaking behind a table. On the table were a few papers and a glass, and a tablecloth of a peculiarly violent red. Harland looked down and along it, until he came to his own hand with the papers under it. He remembered then that his own speech was to begin in five minutes, and he felt extraordinarily sick at the thought. . . .

("This measure, as you know, has always been an important item of the Liberal programme. . . ." Thus Quatermaine.)

. . . The room was overpoweringly hot and quite full. Harland calculated that there must be three hundred there. He began to examine the faces before him, and was chiefly impressed by their stolidity. All eyes were turned to the platform, as if in attention, but there appeared no spark of interest anywhere. That must be altered. . . . Some point of Quatermaine's elicited applause, yet the faces changed little. Harland looked at the end of the room.

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Several young men down there had climbed on to a bench to hear better. There was a clock over their heads, and the minute hand crept on with appalling rapidity. "Ten to eight," thought the candidate. "I must try to fill up forty minutes, I suppose. Then Cassilis and the little men." . . . He became aware that the people were applauding. He looked up. Quatermaine had sat down, and was waiting for him a trifle nervously. . . .

He stood up. . . .

The cheering began again and went on for a long time. Harland looked down at his own hands and saw that the papers in them were shaking. A phrase that he had typed large stood out distinctly from the middle of the first page. Then between his eyes and the paper came a sudden surprising vision of Michael Dittany's face, clear as in life. So curious are the tricks that memory plays. It was gone in an instant, not to be recalled, like a face in a dream. Francis Harland laid down his notes on the table, raised his head, and faced his audience. The room, though he did not know it, was absolutely silent now, and had been so for almost a minute. . . .

He became conscious of a voice, as from a great distance, unrecognised, speaking incomprehensible things. Then he saw that a man

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in the audience laughed approvingly, and there was more cheering, which obliged him to pause. Lastly, he spoke with his own voice, familiar phrases that he had prepared, and understood that he held his audience. They were awakened now, he did what he chose with them. The heat and bad air of the place hung like a cloud between him and them, so that he only saw them with the vagueness of a dream. He was arrested by a face here and there—an old man who nodded his head, a boy, open-mouthed, roaring approval, a woman with patient, bewildered eyes. Then the lamps flickered, and all was dim again. He gathered himself to his final effort. . . .

After he had sat down they would not stop cheering. Harland shut his eyes for a moment. Doctor Cassilis, watching him with professional interest, thought, "That man's going to faint." But even as the thought crossed the young man's mind Harland looked up and smiled curiously at the people. It was as if he said, "Just as well you don't understand me better." Cassilis wondered for the first time if the speech he had applauded were sincere. A consummate orator is apt to carry himself away on the same tide that overwhelms his audience. Cassilis felt suspicious, and the first sentences of his own speech were frigid.

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But Harland had merely relapsed into his usual quiet cynicism. "I wonder what I've been saying. I've promised them the Millennium, I suppose. They seem to have believed me. It's the credulity of these people that's the most impressive thing about them. They'll accept any theory that's offered them with conviction. Well, this is a change from my life three weeks ago. Michael, you've a great deal to answer for. What a divine game it is! I'm beginning to understand Letty's enthusiasm a little better. There's an insidious fascination about the business that goes to your head like drugs. I'll write and tell her so to-night." He began to sketch out a letter for Letty that should please her, and so missed Robin Cassilis' speech, which was a pity, as the doctor warmed to his work and spoke excellently.

Afterwards the meeting came to an end, and the party struggled out through an enthusiastic crowd. The inevitable humorist shouted "Westminster" to Harland's chauffeur, and the car started. Harland received congratulations.

"I'm afraid I was on the short side," he deprecated; and indeed it had seemed so to him.

"Forty-five minutes," returned the agent dryly, and everyone laughed.

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It was not much after ten when they got back to the house, but it was eleven before Harland was alone. He went into the library and wrote his second love-letter to Letty Underhill.

". . . We had our first meeting to-night. Naturally, I wanted you there, but my cowardice was a spectacle that you are better without. I should like to become thoroughly hardened before I speak in the presence of my most severe critic. Meanwhile, I admit that I am converted. This is the most ridiculously attractive of occupations, and I see myself becoming a fanatic in the near future; unless you come and laugh me out of it. My own sense of humour is gone already. You must save me. When you do write to me, promise an early date for your arrival. I am surrounded by the hosts of the Philistines, who never see a joke, and would sell their souls to return me to Parliament. In a very little while I shall be taking the whole foolish business seriously myself. Come and rescue poor Francis Harland before he is overpowered. . . ."

At this point he began to realise that what he had written was to another address. He copied it fair, giving it another beginning, and addressed it to Mrs. Dittany, Marshdikes, Isle of Oxeney, Sussex. And to Letty he wrote a

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second epistle—charming, light, inconsequent as a drift of apple-blossom, without a word of fatigue in it. When both letters were finished he sat with the envelopes before him, balancing and considering them; and in a little time he began to laugh.

"There are most decidedly two sides to my head," he reflected. "Letty's the dearest child I ever met. At the same time, if Celia weren't Michael's wife, and had time to spare for me, I could fall in love with her very deeply indeed. . . . I should like to hear her laugh if I told her that." His face softened. He took up Celia's letter, which invited her and her husband to stay with him during the election, and thought that he would add the jest in a postscript. But after all he did not. It was, he reflected, a little too foolish even for Celia, who liked the divinely absurd. "I'll tell her some other time," thought he. "I suppose Michael and she will be coming very soon."

And then he forgot both the women, and thought only of Michael, about whose opinion of his work he cared more than anything else in the world. When Michael came everything would begin. These days were mere preliminary, until Michael should be there to watch the fight. Afterwards it would go to its appointed end, which was not yet foreseen.

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"If only I hadn't wasted all these years," said Harland to himself. That was the hardest to bear of all his thoughts.

Michael and Celia came two days later. They were to stay at Harland's house. Letty Underhill came from town that day also, and drove out with them, on her way to her own home. So that Harland's first sight of her again was at his own fireside. He had been obliged to go with Cassilis to an afternoon meeting, as it was Saturday; and they were a little late. He came in quickly to the hall, and Letty ran to meet him, like an impulsive child. She did not kiss him, but she put both hands on his arm and looked up at him eagerly. He had the impression that she was extraordinarily happy, and in some way much younger than he had remembered. Perhaps this was the effect of the little close bonnet that she wore, and the big fur coat. She was quite swallowed up in them, as if she had been a doll. "I'm just going home, Francis!" she cried. "You've been too long. . . ." She laughed at him.

"Impossible," replied he, yielding to her mood. "Take off your coat and sit down."

"You can't keep me," said Letty. "Can he, Michael?"

Francis Harland put her very gently aside.

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"Is Michael there too?" And he went forward. His eyes, growing accustomed to the light of the hall, found Michael, standing there, and smiling just as he always did. Nothing else mattered at all for the moment. It was not until he had Michael's hand in his own that Harland remembered Celia Dittany.

He looked at her then, where she stood at his elbow; and he smiled contentedly, making no apologies, because he saw from her eyes that she understood. "We don't count, do we?" said she, and she just touched his left hand with her own, in a gesture that he remembered as if he had seen it yesterday. "And are you popular with your constituents yet?" she teased him.

"Universally," he replied, and turned to look for Letty.

She was talking to Robin Cassilis.

"Here's my best helper," said Harland, walking up to them and introducing Cassilis, whom he liked already. "You'll have to make great friends with him, Letty."

"Oh, but I've known Robin for years," said Letty. "Where did you think I'd learnt my bandaging?"

Robin's dark, almost melancholy, face was turned to her inquiringly. "Who've you been bandaging lately?" he inquired. So

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then the story of Harland's riding accident had to be told. The doctor watched Letty throughout. "Good man . . ." said he absently, when the recital was done. Letty blushed and looked adorably shy. It appeared that she was glad to be praised by Robin Cassilis. . . .

Later in the evening, when they were by themselves, Harland said to Celia Dittany, "Why didn't I know before that Cassilis was a friend of Letty's?"

She looked curiously at him. "He's probably wondering the same thing about you. But he's known her ever since he came and took this practice. She trained for a year and a half under him, when she was going to be a hospital nurse. That was an earlier craze," with a smile at the memory. "But Robin taught her a lot. And he wanted to marry her before you did."

"Cassilis?" Harland betrayed an unusual surprise, which appeared to annoy Celia.

"Of course. Anyone could have told you that. Only he didn't speak soon enough, and she'd got her head full of you by the time he did. Why do you look like that? I suppose you flatter yourself no one ever looked at her before you were graciously pleased to do so?" She laughed, but she was a little vexed, and Harland saw it. He made her a

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very humble apology, and in the end was forgiven.

When he thought the news out afterwards he was surprised to find himself a little annoyed with Cassilis. . . .

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XII

ROBIN'S TRADE

THE next few days were very busy for Harland. Time was short and he had to work without ceasing. He drove from one meeting to another, and canvassed intently. Robin Cassilis was a great help to him, as was Michael, who was well known in Greywall through his stepfather, Colonel Underhill. And Letty grew very excited, canvassed and spoke, and drove everywhere with Harland and the Dittanys. The secret of her engagement was not long kept. It became a rumour, then a certainty, and Harland was the more popular for it, since the British voter loves a candidate with a fiancée in his motor.

But before the news was made public, Letty, driving to an afternoon meeting, encountered Robin Cassilis by the side of the road. He was standing among the ruins of his motor-cycle; and when he saw her coming he walked into the middle of the road, and lifted his hand to stop her car. She leaned out of the

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window. "What's the matter, Robin?" she called.

Robin had stopped to speak to the chauffeur. Now he came round and got into the car. "Skidded into the wall," he explained briefly. "And I've a bad case the other side of Kingsfold. I've told your man to drive me there." The car was backing already. "It's rather serious, otherwise I'd not have stopped you."

"B-but," hesitated Letty, "I've got to speak at a meeting at Stone. And I'm late already." She was disturbed. This seemed to her very much more important than any business of Robin's. She said to herself, "I must stop the car and go on. This won't do." Yet she did not make any attempt to direct the chauffeur, and the country was slipping by already. Robin Cassilis had evidently ordered speed.

"Awfully sorry," he was saying, "but they telephoned me, and I had to go at once. And the roads are like glass to-day. It rained for half an hour last night, and froze again on top of it. Just enough to make the surface exactly right." He laughed shortly. "So I went straight into the wall."

"Robin," said Letty sharply, "your forehead's all cut."

He put up his hand, and brought it away

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with a red smear on the palm. "Quite likely," said he. "I'm glad it was no worse."

"But, Robin . . ."

He smiled vaguely at her. "It makes me feel a bit stupid, that's all. Don't talk for a little, Letty dear." He had not spoken so gently to her since the day when she refused to marry him. But his face was pale, and he leaned back in his corner, frowning. Letty stared at him unhappily.

"Oh! . . ." said Letty under her breath. She fumbled in her muff for a ridiculous little lace handkerchief, and held it out to Robin Cassilis.

He laughed then, as most men who were fond of her laughed at Letty, and "Thank you," said he. He took the handkerchief, and held it to his forehead. "I'm glad you happened to come by when you did," he went on in an unsteady voice.

Letty crouched among her furs, and looked at him with large, child's eyes. He did not speak again, but sat quiet, dabbing at his cut forehead from time to time.

The car passed Kingsfold, and stopped two miles farther on before a cottage.

"Here's my case," said the young doctor. "Now you can drive back to your meeting, Letty. You'll only be half an hour late, and you can tell them that you've been helping me.

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They'll forgive you. I'm sorry I made you come out of your way." His voice was extremely gentle. "Shall I tell the man where to go?"

"But how will you get home? It's over twelve miles."

"Oh, some way. Don't think about that. You've got to go and speak for Harland, you know."

Something in his voice made the girl bite her lip. "I'll stay and drive you back," she said.

Robin Cassilis hesitated, then appeared to accept a reproof. "That's very good of you, Letty. I shall be about half an hour."

"I'll send Charles back into Kingsfold to telephone my excuses."

She followed him out of the car. He stood looking at her for a moment. Then, "Will you come in?" he inquired, jerking his head towards the cottage.

For some reason Letty smiled. "It's not for the first time, is it? If I may help. . . ."

"That's what I mean. The woman here's a fool. You do know how to do what you're told."

Letty nodded, and, turning, instructed her chauffeur as she had said. Afterwards she and Cassilis walked up the garden path together.

"What is it?" said she, and he, "Child

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burnt itself. The old story . . . no fire-guard . . . mother not looking. . . . Some women don't deserve to have charge of their own children."

They went into the cottage. Cassilis got out of his mud-splashed overalls and his fur gloves, and went into the living-room, where he could scarcely stand upright under the low ceiling. He was a very tall, fair youth, so sunburned that his hair and thick eyelashes looked almost white. His hands fascinated Letty chiefly, as he warmed them for a moment before the fire and listened to the mother's story. They were unusually delicate for so strong a man, and they looked very sensitive. Letty, slipping out of her fur coat, could not take her eyes from them, as Cassilis chafed and twisted them together. She seemed never to have noticed them before.

A little later she watched them at work over the body of the child, and heard Cassilis comforting it in a voice that was not new to her. In her own hands were a basin of oil and some dressings. Cassilis told her to do this and that, and she obeyed him. At first she was a little slow and awkward. It was a year since she had last worked with Cassilis, and once he said to her, "Quickly, please," without looking to see how the painful colour rose in her cheeks at the reproof. But afterwards she did better,

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and when the half-hour was over he thanked her. The woman of the house cried and blessed them both. She was rather hysterical, and Cassilis had to speak sharply to her.

Then he went out with Letty, and found the car waiting. "Tell him your house," said Letty; "it's all on our way." They drove off together. The afternoon was bright and cold. There had been a shower of sleet while the two had been in the cottage. It had left the landscape shining as if new washed. The air was clear, the distant hills very blue; on the fields was a powdering of white that melted already.

"You've not forgotten how to bandage," said Cassilis as they drove.

She laughed and sighed. "I've had no practice lately, except . . ."

"Except on Francis Harland." Cassilis finished her sentence for her steadily enough.

Letty did not reply. There was a moment's silence.

"He's a clever fellow," said Cassilis, with some difficulty. "We're . . . lucky to have him down here."

"Do you think so?" returned Letty carelessly, but with a sidelong glance.

It vexed Cassilis. "We've never had anyone so good," he told her.

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"Oh, I know you admire him!" Letty cried, it seemed impatiently.

The young doctor looked at her in a way that she knew and feared, yet had been impelled to provoke. His eyes were grave and sad, the lines of his mouth angry. "What's the use of talking like that?" he demanded wearily. "You're going to marry him, aren't you?"

"What does it matter to you?" retorted Letty, in a voice that trembled now.

Cassilis did not trouble to answer that. He turned his head away, and so missed the colour that sprang to her face. She looked straight in front of her, and tried to keep her eyelids so still that the tears should not fall. But her lips were quivering. She fought down the pain in her throat until it became too great. "Robin," she cried out suddenly, with a little breaking sound that became a sob. He turned and saw that she was crying. . . .

And then, of course, he forgave her, as he always did. It hurt him too much to be angry with her. After all, she was only a child, and he knew it. He had never thought that she could love him. The only thing he could do was to smile and give her up to Harland, if she wanted him. "Letty, don't cry," said he, comforting her. "It's all right. You're not afraid of me?"

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She said, drying her eyes, "I thought you were going to be angry about Francis," with a troubled appeal in her voice.

"You've promised to marry him?" said Cassilis, turning rather white at the name and the way she pronounced it.

And Letty said, "Yes."

There was no more talk for a little while, and they heard the running of the car along a smooth piece of road.

It was Cassilis who spoke first, taking the conduct of affairs. He was himself again by that time, and only anxious to make Letty smile once more. He did not mean to spoil her happiness. "Do you know, I thought you had," said he, lightly enough.

"Did you?" Letty's voice was very small.

"Why, yes. I've been trying to get accustomed to the idea for several days." —No hint of the intensity of that struggle in his manner of speech.—"You see, I always knew someone would take you away from me. So I got into the way of looking out for suspicious characters. And I guessed what you'd been doing. I know you too well for you to keep any secrets from me." He smiled at her. He had a curious, one-sided smile that it hurt Letty to watch. "And I've had the reward of congratulating you before anyone else. You'll thank me, won't you, Letty?"

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She had not often heard him talk for so long without hesitations. He was a silent young man of habit, even with her.

"Robin, you're awfully kind," she began.

"Not kinder than you deserve," he answered quickly.

Letty, an inconsiderate creature, pressed his hand and thanked him. He drew a quick breath, as if she had hurt him; and she wondered why, since his speech had been so cheerful. In a moment he quieted himself, laid her hand back on the fur rug, and went on talking. "I do congratulate you very heartily, Letty. Harland's a very clever fellow. He can give you the life you want. He's evidently found his profession in politics. He'll go far, and take you with him."

The difficulty of bringing out the last sentence was unusually well surmounted.

Letty, however, seemed not altogether pleased. And, after a moment, "I think you might congratulate him, too," she said, almost petulantly. "The advantages aren't all on my side, I suppose?"

Robin looked at her averted face disturbedly, as he might have looked at a child in a rage. "Letty . . ." he began, feeling something amiss in her attitude, "of course I didn't mean . . ." His own feeling overcame him,

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however. "Oh, I'll congratulate Harland," he said—"if I can for envy. He ought to be down on his knees thanking all his gods for what's being given him."

Letty had been looking out of the window at the flying, sunset-yellow fields. She turned her head again. Cassilis, watching hungrily, beheld a look that he did not know.

"On his knees?" said Letty strangely. "No, Francis is not doing that much," and then, with the beginnings of a very curious smile, "You would, I suppose?" She did not look like a child now, but Cassilis omitted to notice the change. He was in too much pain.

"Let that alone," he said sharply, and turned away from her.

She did not endeavour to recall or soften him, but he heard her sigh to herself, as if she were tired. He repented of a moment's bitterness. "I'm sorry, Letty," he told her. "It's . . . a little hard for me, you see." No more than that, for Cassilis believed in restraint, a fact which had militated against him with Letty in the past. But, "I know it is, Robin," said she. . . . He missed the kindness in her face. "We'll talk about something more interesting than my feelings," he replied.

They talked about the case they had seen.

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He gave her professional details, which she appeared to grasp easily. "I'd like to go over again," said she.

"Would you?" The young doctor's tone was unwarily eager. Letty looked up, and smiled full at him, then caught fear from his eyes, and trouble. "But you'll be too busy," said Cassilis. "The meetings . . ."

"Oh, the meetings . . ." Letty got no further.

There was an awkward pause.

"But you won't be able to do it any more after you're married," said Cassilis, cruel in his turn because of the pulse of fear at the back of his brain.

"Will Francis stop me?" faltered Letty. They looked at each other for a long moment.

"You'll forget . . ." Cassilis disconnectedly began.

Letty opened her lips, then checked herself, and laughed unsteadily. "You're home," she said. Indeed, the car was just stopping. "Get out, Robin. I've got to go and apologise to Francis for cutting his meeting." She spoke fast, and she leant forward and flung open the door beside her.

Cassilis stepped across the rug and her feet and got out. As he shut the door he looked in at her for a moment, but said nothing. She ordered him, "Tell Charles to drive back fast.

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I'm frozen." Cassilis obeyed. Letty pulled up the window and huddled back into her corner again, shutting her eyes.

Ten minutes later she was at home. Harland, who had come over to dine with her people before the evening's work, met her as she walked in; and, "Letty, where have you spent your afternoon?" he asked smilingly. "They're inconsolable at Stone because you didn't arrive, so Quatermaine tells me. I shall never be member for this division if my most valuable supporter takes to deserting me without warning." He made as if to loosen the furs about her throat.

She resisted his hands. "Don't talk nonsense, Francis." She was oddly impatient with him. "What does a wretched little women's meeting at Stone matter? You'd get in just as soon if I never spoke at another." She walked away from him, pulling off her gloves.

Harland's eyebrows went up. "This is strange doctrine for Letty Underhill, when it's the women who'll manage politics altogether in ten years' time." He laughed as he quoted a rash saying of hers. "In pursuit of what mirage did you vanish, Letty? I couldn't hear the explanation when Quatermaine rang me up. I hope you've some story ready that'll make good copy for the *Beacon*. They love

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a 'pretty incident' when the public has grown weary of speeches."

Letty faced him, curiously white. "Make that of it, if you're cold-blooded enough. Robin took my car five miles out of Stone to drive him to a case. I went with him. A child . . . in Kingsfold . . . that had burnt itself. I held the dressings for him . . . oh! it cried horribly . . . all the time. If you had heard . . ." She broke down at last, sobbing wildly.

Harland tried to comfort her. "You poor little thing! It was much too much for you; you're tired out." But she pushed him from her, and escaped, stumbling and crying, to her own room.

Harland, very repentant, did not see her again before he left that evening, and was surprised to find himself speaking worse than usual, in consequence of his preoccupation with the thought of her tears. When he saw her again next day she was looking tired and unlike herself. But she admitted that she had lost control the evening before, and apologised prettily. Harland forbade her any meetings for the next three days, and she accepted the verdict with a submission that touched him. He was beginning to find the secret of her power in a sort of wistful helplessness, oddly at variance with her practical airs. He spent more time with her than

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he could well afford, and treated her very gently.

The story of her adventure, however, made the theme of an unusual discussion between Celia and himself. He went to her at once, as to one who could explain the incomprehensible troubles of a girl; and, "I wish Cassilis had picked out any other car in the county," fretted he, walking up and down the room. "It was all too much for Letty. She's looked tired out ever since."

"I suppose you think that's the result of the things she saw in her cottage." Thus, unexpectedly, Celia, with a watchful look. Sure enough, Harland winced. Celia began to laugh, in a way that was not natural to her; and, "Francis, you're jealous," said she.

Harland took another turn in silence. Celia followed him with her eyes. She had an expression of fatigue, if not of vexation; and Harland, coming back to her, observed it. He took her hands in his. "Celia," he said, "I worry you a good deal, don't I? Tell me I'm a fool, and send me about my business for good."

She did not look up at him for a moment; but then, "I'm too fond of you for that," she answered quietly.

'That's all right." He smiled at her.

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"It's your fault, really. If it hadn't been for you I should never have been in a position to be jealous of anyone where Letty was concerned."

Celia said, "I don't forget that," in a tone that made him glance sharply at her.

"You're not beginning to repent of your activities already, are you?" he teased her. "Because I shall be eternally grateful for them. I've got much more than I deserve."

"Quite true," returned Celia.

Harland laughed. "I'm glad you said that. I expect these little reproofs from you every now and again, and I'm lost when I don't get them. I was beginning to think that you'd lost interest in me. I've heard so few lately, and you've been so extraordinarily kind to me."

His talk ended there, because of the look that came into Celia's eyes. It made his heart beat fast, and for the moment he could not speak even her name. He was still holding her hands lightly in his. Unconsciously his fingers closed on hers until he must have hurt her. Then he dropped her hands and turned away.

"You're in love with Letty," said Celia behind him, steadily enough. And, "I expect that's it," he told her in a voice that he did not recognise as his own.

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"I knew you'd give in, sooner or later."

"I gave in . . . to you . . . a long time ago," replied Francis Harland, almost carelessly. And after a moment he came back and talked about Letty at great and lover-like length.

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XIII

DISCORDS

LETTY'S docility did not last. In three days she was herself again, and could not be prevented from speaking at a large meeting in Greywall. Some local women's organisation had arranged it, and insisted on having Letty. Letty was equally determined to go. Also she wished Harland to be among her audience. "You've never heard me. I do want you to come."

Harland teased her. "You'll be nervous. Your eloquence will fail you."

She shook her head obstinately. "I'm too old a hand for that. Don't be stupid, Francis."

A single line that he was beginning to know appeared between her brows. Harland wanted to kiss it away, and forbid her to speak in public again. But authority and Letty did not go well together. He sighed, the counterpart of her frown on his forehead, and—"I'll come if you want me, dear," he promised. "You've only to command me, you know, always."

"Of course I want you," she answered, with

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one of her rare, shy caresses. A moment later she checked him with talk of his latest speech, and a mistake he had made in statistics.

Harland did not know whether her earnestness disposed him more towards laughter or tears. "Oh, Letty, does it matter?" he whispered.

She held him from her with a light resolution, and went on with her argument.

Next day he attended her meeting, at some inconvenience to himself. His time was very short now, and his supporters were working him hard. But by reckless driving he managed to get to Greywall not more than twenty minutes late. Letty's meeting was in a hall near the market-place, where he himself had once spoken. He drove thither, and, leaving the car, made his way through a side door unobserved. He did not wish to go up on to the platform at once. He went down the long passage at the side of the hall, and as he went he heard the sound of applause within. It made him start and smile, almost ruefully. "That's Letty, I suppose," he said to himself. The thought did not appear to please him.

He went on. At the lower end of the hall he found a door open, and stood beside it. There was no one in his immediate neighbourhood, though the hall was crowded with men and women. At the end of the gangway

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was a platform, with many people on it. And just in front and before them Letty, speaking. She was a little, upright figure in the soft red that she had worn throughout the election, because it was Harland's colour. He saw her pale face and pale gesticulating hands against a dark background; he heard her voice, distant and silver-clear, and very youthful. Something of what she was saying came to him; it was fluent enough, but oddly commonplace, a mere patchwork of other people's thoughts on a subject of which the girl knew nothing. Letty, with absolute sincerity, was enunciating interminable platitudes and misstatements. Yet she spoke well and forcibly; and the crowd applauded her. Very lonely she looked in that great place, the turn of her head made Harland think that she was afraid. When the people shouted she had to wait for a moment, and the unconscious gesture of her hands was the most appealing thing Harland had ever seen. It made him long to hide her, and take her away. He thought of a possible scene when the crowd might be, not friendly, but hostile; and the thought turned him sick. "Why do I let her do this for me?" he asked himself. "No woman ought to be looked at as these people look at her. They're criticising her . . . laughing at her . . . tearing her to pieces. She doesn't understand, but I

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ought to have known. I ought to have forbidden it. She shall never do it again."

Letty was arriving at her conclusion, and her voice gathered strength. Harland listened no more. He went away, and hurried back up the long passage till he came to the platform door. At the same moment he heard the applause that meant the end of Letty's speech. He made his way through the lines of chairs, and reached her side. She had sat down. She glanced up at him, and her face betrayed her welcome. He stood beside her for a moment, oddly affected at the sight of her. From her he looked at the audience and smiled. The action made rumour a certainty for most people there. Harland's engagement had been suspected before, and the cheers he now received were a sign of general approval. But he would not speak, though the audience clamoured for him, and almost at once he said to Letty, under cover of the noise, "Come away, will you? I want to take you home."

The pleasure faded from her look; but she got up, and came out with him. Behind them the crowd quieted itself, and a single voice began again. People were coming out of the hall before Harland's car was started. He went inside with Letty, and they had their first real quarrel.

He said to her, "Letty, don't do that again.

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I can't stand it. You're too young." There was none of his usual deliberation in his manner; he spoke unevenly, and appeared vexed. In reality his pity was so great as almost to overwhelm him. He could have cried over Letty and her ridiculous solemnities, that meant so much to her. There were tears in her eyes now, and her voice was tragic.

"You never let me do anything I want," she raged. "You don't care what happens to me. . . . You only think of yourself. I hate you!"

"Oh! my dear Letty," sighed Harland ruefully. What line of argument was to be taken with a child in such a mood? Wisely, he attempted little. "I'm only thinking of you. I can't bear to see you as tired as you are now. This isn't doing you any good, you know."

"But . . ." She struggled with her tears. "I was trying to help you. I can . . . I do. I'm not thinking of my own pleasure. It's that you should get in. Oh! you're ungrateful . . . you're cruel."

How resist such an appeal without brutality? Harland made clumsy attempts.

"But, my darling, I can't let you do this kind of thing for me. You're burning yourself away. I want you strong and happy."

His arguments were of little use. "If you

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really loved me you'd let me do what makes me happy. You only want me to amuse you. When I'm tired and miserable you don't care for me any longer."

Harland could do nothing then but kiss her, over and over, vowing that she was all the world to him, and sick with a sense of misunderstanding and failure.

After he had taken her home and left her there, he went back to his own house. He found Michael and Celia waiting there, both, it struck him, curiously eager for news. He came to them from the outside, and found them, as it were, united against him, though for no apparent hostile purpose.

"How did Letty speak?" inquired Celia.

Michael did not echo her question, but it was evident that he shared it. Harland looked at his thoughtful face, with its air of infinite understanding, and came to confession. "Too well," said he. "Advise me, Michael."

He told them the afternoon's events. Celia sat by the fire, head on hand, watching him. The red light showed Harland her expression, and the quick turn of her head. She heard the story with eager pity, and Harland knew that her sympathy and counsel were secure. Yet it was not to her that he spoke, but to Michael, who sat silent, and did not make any comment.

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"If I'd only thought of this!. . ." repented Celia.

Michael looked at her and at Harland, standing near her, as at two children whom he would have helped. "You might have, Celia," he admitted.

"If you dare to say that you prophesied it yourself!. . ." she cried out, her laughter unsteady.

"I'll not do that. I can't remember at this date of time. And you'd kill me, wouldn't you?"

She stretched out her hands to him in one of her adorable gestures. "I give up. Take Francis over, and look after him. He hates me now. Don't you, Francis?"

Harland did not contradict her in words, and, curiously enough, she did not look at him.

"I'm not competent to advise Francis," came Michael's quiet voice.

"If you both desert me I'm lost." Thus Harland, looking from one to the other. "I admit that Letty's beyond my guiding at the moment. I don't know what to do with her." He spoke, as he so often did, with mock humour that concealed a very real trouble. "Why does she want these diversions?"

Michael did not attempt to explain his sister. It was Celia who, a little vexedly, cried out, "For a professed Liberal, Francis, you're about

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the most Conservative man I know where your womenkind come in."

"I hate a woman who works," Harland shortly replied.

Michael laughed quietly to himself. "One for you, Celia," he remarked.

And the novelist, after a moment's vexation, laughed too. "I thought as much, didn't I?" she said. She went to Harland, and shook him by the arm. "Apologise, Francis," she commanded. "I'll never forgive you that all my days."

"Oh! you're different," Harland told her, less collectedly than usual.

"You might have worded your apology better," complained Celia. "But I suppose I must take it as it stands. I shan't get anything better out of you." She made him a curtsey, and he bowed to her.

"Letty's too young, all the same," he told Michael across her.

Michael nodded. "But you'll find it difficult to break her of the habit. And I'm not sure that you'll be wise to try."

The conference became abruptly serious.

"She's an independent, solitary creature," said Michael. "And she needs occupation. If she doesn't get it she frets herself all to pieces."

"She wants to help you, Francis," said Celia, all the tenderness of her nature in her voice.

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"And these things *are* very serious to her. She loves them, and she understands them."

"I wonder if she does?" Harland thought of the afternoon's speech. "Isn't it all girl's nonsense? You thought so once, Celia." He appealed to her as from a question that troubled him.

She did not give him the answer that he sought. "I'm not quite sure," she said. And Michael also answered, "I'm not quite sure."

Harland looked from one to the other. "You're not serious. I can't believe she won't grow out of all this. Letty? . . . Why," his voice softened, "she's only . . . what is it? . . . twenty-one . . . twenty. . . . And mentally she's about sixteen."

"Only because you treat her so," said Michael.

And Celia went on: "She's young enough and fond enough of you, Francis, to grow up into anything you choose. But it's hard on her if you spoil her for what she was meant to be, just to keep her at the age that amuses you."

She was standing close to Harland, and she was almost as tall as he. She looked at him very straight, without a smile. He made a little gesture of defence, then his hand fell to his side. There was an odd pause.

"We interfere a good deal in Francis's con-

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cerns, don't we?" said Michael then, whimsically, getting to his feet.

"I'll reform," promised Harland, with a laugh that covered some feeling. "I needed advice."

"And you got it, didn't you?" Celia said, going back to the chair by the fireside. "I'll talk to Letty to-morrow, though."

"She needs a little attention," Michael agreed, "and you'll manage her better than Francis here." He knew that the remark would be taken in good part.

"Oh, I'm very much out of favour," Harland agreed, ruefully. "Celia, you'll have to explain me."

"She may this time," said Michael. "But it's your work in the end."

Harland looked at him, and discovered that Michael, as usual, understood a good deal more than he had put into words. "I'll do my best," he promised, with an earnestness that was foreign to him.

And then Michael went away, and Harland and Celia were left together.

"You see," said Harland, as if in answer to something left unspoken, "it's been a mistake after all. Michael knows that. I ought never to have given in. I'm not the man to make her happy."

Celia looked up at him with extraordinary fear. "You're not going to run, now? You

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can't; you must go on. Letty can't do without you." She spoke very quickly.

Harland did not face her. He stood beside her, and leant against the chimney-shelf. There was an old blue china pot there, and he took it into his hands, and traced the curve of it with his fingers, over and over, in a blind, mechanical way, as if it were of importance to him. "No, I'll not run," he said. "I've got to go on . . . for a variety of reasons." He put the china down, slowly and with awkward care; and Celia watched him.

"Francis," she said abruptly, "your hands are trembling."

He turned. Her hands were upon his, warm and loving and strong; she was as unconscious as a child. "Oh! my dear, my dear," said she. "What have I done? I've spoilt your life."

A long shudder went through him. Then, steadying himself, he looked at her, smiled even, and pressed her hands. "My dear Celia," he said, "I shall have to lecture you as I do Letty. You're full of fancies, and tired out."

"I only wanted to help you," she cried. "I thought she would make it easier for you. You were so lonely."

"I was born lonely," said he. "Don't worry over me. What's the use? I make my own troubles."

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"But your troubles are mine." She was very close to him still.

"God forbid," said he; and shook off her hands. She stared after him, pitifully bewildered. He walked towards the door; then turned and came back to her. "We've talked of that before, haven't we, Celia?" he said, with more steadiness. "I can't have you involved in my pessimism. Lecture me for my own good. I'm treating Letty abominably, all because I don't understand her. Tell me what a girl's thoughts are like. I mustn't hurt her. All her life's with me now. I can't throw it away. Tell me what to do with it. You're nearer her age than I am." He smiled as he spoke.

"I daren't advise you now," Celia answered. "I've done too much already."

He told her, "Everything you've done has helped me. Where should I be if it wasn't for you? There's no one in the world like you." He did not himself know how much there was in his tone.

"Except Michael," corrected Celia, with a look at him that he did not understand.

He took her addition. "Except Michael," he agreed quietly; and then, breaking out, "Oh, Celia, you're too good to me," he cried. "When I remember your own trouble . . ."

She silenced him with the touch of her

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fingers on his lips. "Don't, Francis," she whispered, her voice breaking for a moment. Then, more steadily, "Why, you don't suppose I grudge you anything, do you?"

"I give you so much trouble," said he.

Her eyes were bright, and he wondered if it could be with tears. But her laughing voice was more beautiful than any sad voice he had ever heard. "You've given me all the trouble you could, Francis," she said to him. "From the very beginning. As if I didn't remember! When I was a girl first, and you came and amused yourself with me. And I took you too seriously, and tried to break my heart over you. And when you came to Marshdikes, and wouldn't be advised; and Letty was being myself over again." She ran swiftly from one memory to another, her laughter was a caress. "When you were ill, and I had to nurse you. . . . When you reformed, and I had to advise you. . . . Oh! what a business it's been! And now . . ." She stopped short.

"Now?" he echoed, with a look that frightened her.

She drew herself away from him for a moment. He did not stir. He was watching her very intently. There was a long pause.

"Go on," said Harland, under his breath.

But Celia shook her head, and came back to him. There was no fear in her eyes now,

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only gentleness. She looked at him as he had seen her look at a tired child.

"Why, now," she said, "you want someone to scold you more than ever. You're working every hour of the day, and dreaming about your work at night. I know you! You never would take any care of yourself. And Letty's a little goose-girl, and worries you; and you see that Michael looks ill, and oughtn't to be here. And you're beginning to think that everything's your fault. In a little while you'll be losing your sense of humour. The end of it all is just this—that I've got to take you in hand again, and tell you how to be happy."

She made him sit in the big chair by the fire, and she knelt at his feet.

"You do forget so easily," she reproached him. "The election 'll be over in a week now, and then you'll be able to be quiet for a little."

"It's the first piece of honest work I've ever done," said Harland bitterly, avoiding her eyes. "No wonder I'm out of training."

She only laughed.

"And Letty?"

"I'll lecture Letty. But she'll learn very easily. She loves you. That solves everything."

"It makes some questions more difficult," he replied obstinately.

Celia retorted with entire inconsequence,

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"Don't hurt me too much, Francis. I'll do all I can for you. But Michael's right. No one can help you in the end but yourself."

After a moment, he turned and faced her. "Forgive me, Celia. I'm tired out, and things are difficult. You can be as angry with me as you like. I shall deserve it."

"Do you think I haven't seen how tired you were?" she replied. "I'm not angry with you. I don't think I could be."

He said very gravely, "If ever I hurt you, Celia, I hope I shall be made to pay for it."

She put her hand on his knees and raised herself to her feet. Standing, and looking down at him, she answered, "You'll always hurt me, Francis, and never know you're doing it. And I shall always forgive you. That's how men and women are made. If you didn't hurt me it would mean I cared nothing about you. . . . We love things . . . and people . . . for the trouble they give us," she added, as if to herself.

"Your philosophy, Celia?" Harland's voice was very gentle.

"My theory of life." She laughed, and so did he. It was as if a danger had passed them by. "I've only just evolved it. I don't know why I inflict it on you. It's a very gloomy one, isn't it? Let's go and see where Michael is. It must be nearly time for dinner. I wish

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elections weren't so disorganising to one's meals. I do so hate feeding insufficiently at six, and listening to your eloquence afterwards. I spend the last half of all the meetings thinking about my supper." She went out of the room with him, teasing him about his speeches.

But late that night Michael came to her room, and found her crying.

"What's the matter?" whispered he, holding her in his arms. And she, clinging to him, repeated over and over, "Francis . . . Francis! . . ." as if the words hurt her.

Michael kissed her. "You always understand," he heard her say. He kissed her again; and his lips were wet with her tears.

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XIV

WOMEN'S THOUGHTS

CELIA went over next day, and talked to Letty Underhill.

The Underhills had a house about five miles away. It was not particularly old or beautiful, but it was comfortable enough in its shabby way, and it expressed Mrs. Underhill's personality. She was a charming, wistful creature, with all Michael's imagination and gentleness. Of Letty's father, Colonel Underhill, and of Letty, she always seemed a little afraid. They were both so decided, and so very clear in their prejudices. Mrs. Underhill never took up a prejudice against anyone. She was, said her daughter, a great deal too tolerant and easy-going.

Celia Dittany had a pleasant half-hour with her mother-in-law, then asked to see Letty.

"Oh! Letty," said Mrs. Underhill. "Yes, do go and see her, if you will. "She's in her room, writing a speech, I think, or reading

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one of Francis's. Love-making goes that way nowadays, as far as I can see. Did you and Michael spend your time criticising each other's short stories?" Her eyes smiled, while her lips remained grave. Michael had inherited the same trick.

Celia laughed. "Some of it. By no means all, though. But Francis is rather old-fashioned, you know. He doesn't care much about Letty's work."

"Doesn't he?" Mrs. Underhill considered. "And Robin Cassilis did. How ungrateful girls are!" The smile was about her lips this time. "Well, I shan't interfere. But I wish I were young again . . . as young as my Letty is. I should know how to be wiser if I had my chance a second time."

"Would you?" questioned Celia wistfully.

Mrs. Underhill smiled, and sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. "No, my dear, I don't expect I should. I've enjoyed my mistakes, just as Letty will. But go up and talk to her. She's very fond of you, and I don't think she's very pleased with life to-day. She doesn't tell me things—she never has. She was always her father's child, and the Underhills keep their mouths shut. I'm used to it, after the years I've lived among them. I never give Letty advice. She wouldn't take it if I did. I don't expect she

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will from you. But one never can tell. Girls will talk to their own friends when they can't to their mothers. We have to put up with it. You'll know when your own time comes."

Celia left her by her wood fire, looking into it as if it were a picture of things sweet and sad that had been.

Letty's room was upstairs, and Celia found her there in the middle of much untidiness, herself in some disorder. She looked like a pretty, rather sulky schoolgirl who is tired of lessons. Her writing-table was heaped with papers, and her chairs with books. But she was not working, either at her own speech or on one of Francis's. She was sitting on the floor in front of the fire, and the room was almost dark. It was about four o'clock on a winter's afternoon.

"Can I come in?" said Celia Dittany.

Letty sprang up, gave her visitor a chair, and lit one of the smaller lamps. But she left it on the table, came back, and sat in the fire-light at Celia's feet. The room was shadowy. Celia talked of indifferent things. Letty's answers were spiritless; she fell into long silences. Celia was too wise to ask her directly what was the matter. She knew Letty's shyness, like that of an animal, and she feared to startle it. So, "You *were* sitting in the dark when I came in," was all she said

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when the moment for speech seemed to have come.

"I like the dark when I'm worried," said Letty, with an effort.

"Did you want to think something out?"

"Yes. . . . Lots of things. Celia! . . ."

"What is it?"

"I've been quarrelling with Francis."

"I'm sorry for that," replied Celia gently.

"I'm not," said Letty. "I was right."

"Doesn't Francis think he may have been too?"

"I don't know." Letty was defiant. "But he's no business to. He was ridiculous. He treated me like a child." Very small and young she looked in the uncertain light. Her thin hands were flung out in a gesture of impatience; she argued with Celia. "He wants to stop my speech-making. . . . You don't seem to think much of that," as Celia sat silent.

"Is it so very much?"

"You know it is. I love it. It's the only thing I can do properly."

"But for Francis? . . ."

Letty was only checked for a moment. "If he understood. . . . But it's not the speaking only. It's the whole thing. He wants to make me into a child again. He'd like me never to think . . . never to speak out . . . never to

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hear a clean, solid fact. He wants to keep me ignorant all my life."

"Letty, you sound like the worst kind of Suffragette oration," said Celia ruefully.

But she was not so unsympathetic as her words, and Letty was clever enough to detect it. She twisted herself along the floor with youthful agility, and put her elbows on Celia's knees.

"You can't laugh at me," she cried appealingly. "You must know what it all means. You work yourself."

"Yes, I do."

"And you wouldn't give it up, not for any Francis . . . or Michael . . . in the world." There was scarcely the hint of a question in Letty's voice.

Celia hesitated, but could not lie to the honest eyes watching her. "I don't think I could," she agreed; adding, however, "Perhaps I might, for Michael," rather absently.

"I'm not going to give up my work for Francis," Letty replied.

"That's a promising spirit to begin married life in," teased Celia, hoping to make the girl smile.

But Letty was obstinately serious. "I can't give up my liberty. Francis has got to be taught that."

"He's old to learn," began Celia lightly; then gave way. "Oh, Letty, you're getting it

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all wrong! How can there be talk of liberty and lessons between you two? That all belongs to a different state of mind. Don't you *love* each other?"

Letty's brown cheek coloured faintly. "Of course." Modern-fashion, she was shy of the word.

"Then the rest ought to settle itself."

"I'm afraid it doesn't," said Letty. She added, with difficulty, "You see, we're not like you and Michael. We don't fit in the same way. I suppose two people who marry always have corners that want knocking off. But we've got more than usual. We're knocking them off now. And it hurts. We've always quarrelled a good deal, but never so much as since we got engaged. I hate Francis sometimes." There was pain in her voice, and fatigue as well, with a child's pathetic resentment against unhappiness.

"It's so hard to show him things," she complained. "He'll laugh at me, and listen to me, and treat me gently; but he won't be serious. He'll do anything for me but that. I want to be allowed to help him with his work. I could, I know; it's my business. I understand it. But he shuts himself away; and talks to me about what he thinks are my affairs. And when I show him my working side he's angry. The other day, over that

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speech, he spoilt everything. I thought he'd be proud of me. But he looked at me as if he despised me." She caught hold of Celia's hands. "Why did he do it?" she cried pitifully.

Celia saw the tears on the long black lashes, and remembered Harland's perplexity over this troubled youth, that was, for him, so incomprehensible. "Oh, Letty, be good to him! He's worried and tired out with all he has to do."

The young eyes did not soften. "Am I never to be tired?" asked Letty wearily.

She slipped down again and crouched on her knees, looking at the fire. "I thought I could do anything for him once. Now he's strange to me again. I don't know what'll happen."

Celia said, "Are you sure it's worth going on with?"

There was a moment's pause. Then the girl recovered herself. "Yes," she returned defiantly, "I must go on. Francis is the only man in the world for me, however much he hurts me. I can't do without him."

Celia's colour had faded a little. "You're still sure of that?"

"Yes. Why do you look at me so? Don't you think I'm right? If you were me, you'd do the same."

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Celia answered steadily, "Yes, I'd do the same."

"Celia, what's the matter with you? You're not crying, are you? Oh! you mustn't worry about it all. It'll come right in the end, won't it?"

Celia felt the warm, childish hands clinging to her own. She could not repel them. She found courage, and an answer that half deceived herself. "Of course. I'm sure of that. You only reminded me of something . . . between Michael and myself . . . a long time ago. And I wondered if you'd be as happy as I have been. For I *have* been happy, and I'm grateful for it, as long as it lasts." Michael and Francis were together in her thoughts; she would not know for whom were the tears in her eyes. "You must have a happy life, Letty," she said. "I couldn't bear it if you hadn't."

"I only want one thing," said Letty.

"Do you? I thought you wanted several, a few minutes ago." Celia laughed to herself.

Letty frowned. She always took teasing hardly. "Oh, I don't know what I want!" She was perplexed again, and in distress. "Why did Francis ever ask me to marry him, if he didn't intend to take me as I was?"

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"Why, I told him he ought to," began Celia lightly; and realised her mistake before the words were out of her mouth. "This is the end," flashed through her mind. "Letty 'll never forgive either of us all our days. I've done for everything." She sat silent, as if before a judge.

"I see," brought out Letty slowly. "That's what had happened. I wondered at the time."

She was quite calm, deliberate even for the moment; she thought out the new situation, as was her way. Celia could not find any words to speak.

"I'm beginning to understand," said Letty, at the end of that long moment. "I couldn't believe that it was true . . . at first, when Francis came to me. But he persuaded me, and I thought he meant what he said. I didn't know he was such a good actor. I ought to have been more careful, of course. I knew he'd never thought twice about me before. But I loved him so. And when he kissed me I thought the world had come right at last."

Celia cried out Letty's name. The girl did not seem to hear her.

"What a fool I've been!" she said, as if to herself. "I might have guessed, all these weeks, that he'd found out his mistake. He's been as gentle as he could, but I'm no use to

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him. I only tire him out." A very strange, unchildlike smile came over her face, as if she had discovered a tragedy that amused her. "I meant to help him so much," she reflected aloud, "but all my help comes to is—this."

Celia tried to put her arms round the girl, but was repulsed. "Oh, my little Letty, don't! He loves you . . . he must." She almost hated Harland for what she had made him do.

Letty, still with that curious smile, shook her head. "No, he doesn't really. Enough to marry me, perhaps. But I wanted more than that." She held Celia at arm's length still. "It's as well you told me, I suppose; but it makes things rather difficult." She was very cold. "Why did you do it at all?"

Celia's voice shook. "I was trying to help you. I thought I could give you what you wanted."

"I wanted Francis of his own free will. You couldn't give me that. But," with sudden fierceness, "you shan't have back what you did give; he's mine, and I'll never let him go." Then, like a child, she began to cry. "You've spoilt it all. I hate him, and I hate you! Oh! why did you do it?"

Celia said, after a moment, "I thought of

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him too. He's very lonely, and very sad. I thought you loved him enough to try and help him. Are you going to give him up now, in the middle of all his difficulties, because of a silly thing I've said, and a silly explanation you've found for it? Is that all you can do for him?" She stopped short, because the feeling in her own voice startled her.

Letty answered, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't expect I shall say anything until after the election's over. I must have time to think about it all . . . try and think." She pushed back the hair from her forehead as if it were too heavy. "There are only two days more. I wanted Francis to win so badly, but now I don't feel as if I cared. It's nothing to me. He won't let it be anything to me. If he loses, I don't expect he'll ever go in for anything of this sort again." Her voice was bitter. "Go away, Celia. There's no more that we can say to-night."

Celia knew her mood, and was obliged to leave her. There was nothing else to be done. And Letty sat before the fire, her head in her hands, thinking of a day when Francis Harland had come to her at her work and kissed her. It seemed very long ago now. "Everything's spoilt," said Letty, aged

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twenty-one. "I hate them both." She coupled Celia and Harland together in her thoughts. "Oh! why couldn't it all stay true?" The fairy-tale of her life had been destroyed. She was, for the moment, as unhappy as her inexperience permitted.

Celia Dittany, whose education had been more complete, went back to Harland's house, and into his library, where she had expected to find Michael. But he was not there, though the room was half lit up. Its only occupant was Francis Harland, who lay in one of the great chairs before the fire. He was asleep.

Celia Dittany went over and stood beside him, without disturbing him. She knew that he had been out all day, and must go out again in a little while. There was only one day before the poll, and the candidate was being driven hard by an energetic agent. Celia was glad that she had not spoken when she first came into the room. Harland would have been awake in a moment, and he needed sleep. In spite of his negligent poses, he had not spared himself during the last three weeks. It was as if he had meant to prove to Michael that his repentance was genuine.

He lay now in the attitude of a man who is wearied out. He was quite quiet, having gone beyond that stage of fatigue which shows

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itself in restlessness. His hands were empty and unclosed, a thing that oddly affected Celia, who knew them better in their waking energy. His head rested against the scarlet leather, and his face looked paler for the contrast. His eyebrows were drawn together in sleep, and the line between them was very distinct. Celia looked long at him, with the fascination of the watcher for one who seems so curiously unconscious and remote. She waited for the heavy lids to unclose, the eyes to look up at her; but Harland never stirred. He was farther away than a look could carry.

Without warning, a sob rose in her throat, choking her. Harland looked so absolutely weary. She remembered the fatigues and troubles he had gone through in the last weeks. She thought of all the distress Letty must needs cause him in the future; she thought of a day that he and she feared together, the day when Michael went from them for the last time. She knew that it would come to them sooner or later. She herself was the only person in the world who understood what that parting would mean to Harland. She had seen his heart when he did not know it. His trouble would be something like her own. Because he had never allowed her to pity him waking, she stood by him now in his sleep, and grieved for him. He seemed

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to her very helpless, lonely, and uncomforted. She would have given much to find a way of making him content.

She went a little nearer. She did not dare to touch Harland, for fear of waking him. But her hands went out towards him, as if they would have shifted the tired head from its awkward position, or covered the unshaded eyes. For her he was a child that is not old enough to understand true happiness. She leant over him, looking down at him; those fluttering hands of hers came down, sank, hovered above the unconscious lips that had once kissed them. Some subtle influence worked itself into Harland's dream. He moved a little, and sighed, and his eyelids quivered, though he did not wake.

Celia stood with her hands at her heart, afraid, it seemed, of discovery. But even after Harland had drowsed into sleep again her tension did not relax. She hesitated, breathing quickly, and staring down at him. The sweet, maternal look was gone from her face; her attitude expressed only fear, and bewilderment, and a curious trouble. She was like one to whom a revelation comes, slow and terrifying, to change the world. She drew back, watching Harland as if fascinated; then turned suddenly, and went out of the room. Harland woke at that moment from a dream

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of her, but never knew what had disturbed him. . . .

The next day was the last of the campaign. Harland set out early with Michael and the agent for some final canvassing and a couple of open-air meetings at the Greywall works. The day was ice-cold, with a high wind from the east, and Celia did not accompany the party. She was alone all day. At two o'clock she had a telephone message from Michael, saying that she must not expect either him or Harland before the six o'clock dinner that was to precede the last meeting. She wished then that she had gone over to the Underhills, or into Greywall, for time went slowly, and her thoughts were bad company. But there was nothing now to be done. She was obliged to wait, looking at the grey, snow-laden sky, and wondering how tired men would stand such weather. At half-past five came Letty, with Robin Cassilis. They had some news of what had been done, and Celia, for the first time, envied them their share in Harland's work. And last, at six o'clock, came Harland himself and Michael, both white with cold and fatigue. Celia felt glad then that she had stayed at home, and was ready to look after them. It was she who made them warm themselves, and eat. Guessing Harland's unacknowledged weari-

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ness, she kept him apart from the others. Letty did not interfere. There was no time to lose. And not long after seven o'clock they were on their way to the last meeting of the campaign.

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XV

THE NIGHT BEFORE

THE drive into Greywall was one that had become familiar to all the party. They took it that evening almost in silence. It was impossible not to remember that the end was very near. In a little more than twenty-four hours Harland would have succeeded or failed. Michael and Celia prayed for his triumph, and expected it. Cassilis and Letty, for different, unexplained reasons, feared it. Only Harland himself was calm. He had an unexpected feeling that the result did not, this time, matter at all. He had fought well, and redeemed his promise to Michael. Henceforward, whatever the result of this one campaign, he had his work and knew what his life must be. He was in an exalted mood, but had perfect command of himself. This was his last meeting, and he was going to speak well at it. He sat opposite to the two women, and Michael was beside him. Cassilis, sitting in front, was a shadow through the glass. The winter night slipped by, hurrying from their

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lamps. Even inside the car it was very cold. No one spoke.

They came to the outskirts of Greywall. The streets were lighted, but almost empty. The crowds were gone to one or other of the two big meetings in the centre of the town. The car drove fast, for the candidate was a little behind time. Celia Dittany said suddenly, in a voice that was rather nervous, "Oh! we're almost there. I wish it weren't the last. Francis, are you excited?"

Out of Harland's corner came his quiet laugh. "I'm doing my best to preserve a philosophic calm. But cheerfulness will keep breaking in, you know."

"Good game, isn't it, after all?" Michael's voice was very friendly.

Letty, moving in the half-dark, said, "I hope it'll be a good meeting." Oddly enough, she seemed the coldest of the four; and the fact that she spoke silenced them.

Then came the lights of the market-place and the doors of the theatre, and a great crowd that surged round the car as it drew up. Cassilis jumped down almost before it was safe, and was at the door as the women got out. "Come quickly," he said. "There'll be a rush for Harland to-night." His six feet of determination made a way for him; and Celia, almost before she realised her safety,

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was inside the stage door with him and Letty. Outside, she heard the cheers. She found her heart beating unsteadily. There was something about the nearness of that great crowd, and its emotion, that terrified her. Letty was feeling it too. Her cheeks were as red as roses, and she glanced about eagerly. Cassilis looked excited, almost angry. "Come along," he said. "There's no time to spare if you want to get to the platform before Harland." He took them along a passage, and to the back of the stage; and someone let them through to their places in the front row.

Celia looked about her. She found herself on the stage of a theatre, and within a couple of yards of the footlights. The space behind her was full of people, incongruously backed by scenery, representing an Italian garden. Overhead were the dusty flies, and all the ropes and pulleys used by the carpenters. The footlights shone in her eyes; but the auditorium beyond was lit up, and she could just see the crowd that filled it. Their voices were in her ears, thunderously. At election time an impatient audience can usually be occupied with the singing of partisan words to a familiar tune. This audience was singing now. Their melody beat into Celia's brain until it almost frightened her. She gripped her hands together as if she were trying to quiet herself. Her

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throat was dry, uncontrollable rigors went through her. The air seemed to be shaking about her, and the walls of the place. A wave of excitement ran over the people; they leaned, and looked, and finally sprang to their feet. The singing was overpowered by a great roar of welcome. Celia turned her head, and saw Harland come to the front of the stage. He had one or two people with him: Quatermaine, her own husband, a member of Parliament who had come down to speak. They were all together, and they found their places without haste. Harland nodded at something that was said to him; and then, because the people would not be quiet, he glanced up at them, and spread out his hands in humorous deprecation. He looked white and rather tired, but very contented. Celia's heart went out to him. "We brought him here, Michael and I. Were we right? Is this what he needs?" The people still shouted. Harland, their servant, stood before them, with his quiet smile, that hid many things. Celia found Michael coming towards her along the second row. She made a place for him, and, when he sat beside her, she put her hand into his under cover of her furs. She wanted to have the strength of his fingers for a little while against her own. "There was so much noise when you all came in," she whispered like a child.

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Michael pressed her hand lightly. "It's a splendid meeting. I hope he'll speak well."

Letty, beyond them, watched Harland with a curious frown.

Quatermaine spoke for perhaps ten minutes. Then came Harland's speech. Celia had heard him many times already, and had no real fear that he would not succeed. But, unconsciously, she clutched at Michael's hand. He himself was staring at Harland, who stood alone before the people. And as once before, at his first meeting, so now there was a long moment of silence after the cheering was done, before Harland spoke. He stood motionless, looking at his audience. And Celia, in the quiet of that great place, heard Michael draw a quick breath, which told her that he was anxious.

"Mr. Chairman . . ." began Harland.

Celia had never heard him pitch his voice quite so high before. She supposed it was the necessity of the place. But the slow, ringing tones were absolutely unfamiliar to her. He used no gestures, save a very occasional movement of the left hand, that had been caricatured, and should therefore have been avoided. But he employed it now once, and Celia guessed him from that to be nervous. He was in profile to her, his head slightly raised as he directed his voice to the upper part of the

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theatre. He put his hands behind him, locking them together firmly. Celia wondered if a nearer observer could have seen that they trembled.

She looked at the audience. They were curiously intent; they sat quietly now, watching and listening. Harland's voice had strengthened. He was speaking really well, and had lost his isolation. His hearers listened to him as if he were one of themselves, and he told them beautiful things. Celia heard him describe the perfect city as he would have it, and his voice was full of love for Greywall. He built it again in a dream of the future, with a happy country beyond it. Celia's eyes filled with tears. Was this the truth? Did such a struggle as he had fought here, as other men fought daily elsewhere, mean to him and to them something more than their own advantage? Did he and they fight, not entirely for their own hand, but in part also for a vision of good unrealised, at times forgotten, yet real to them in spite of their shortcomings? Of Michael, such as his fighting was, she believed it altogether; of Francis Harland she had always wished to believe it, in spite of his mockery. Now she saw him in earnest at last, and had her reward. As in a dream she heard his final words. He stood a moment before the people realised that he had done. His lips

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were still parted in a smile; the light was all about him, making him seem a little unreal to Celia's eyes. She thought, in her simple, gentle heart, "I *was* right. He is good after all. I understand him."

And then came the cheering.

Celia looked round when Harland had taken his seat again. She found Letty very upright, staring straight before her, as was her habit when she feared to admit emotion. The girl's lips were pressed together, and she frowned a little. Celia could not tell whether Harland's speech had taken effect or not. Herself, she would have forgiven him a great deal for the sake of his self-betrayal. But Letty was a curious, obstinate creature. There was no telling what lay behind her reserve.

Celia turned and looked at her husband.

Michael sat with his eyes on his friend and pupil. He was smiling in approval, and he did not try to conceal the fact that Harland's speech had moved him. Celia looked at the thin face, dearer to her even in this moment than anything else on earth. It became evident to her, with a sudden shock, that Michael had never looked so weary before. There was a strange pallor about him, a transparent look, as if the flame of his spirit were burning away the vessel that held it. The question that filled Celia's life rushed to her

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lips again. "How long can I keep him? My God, how long can I keep him?" She put her hand on her husband's arm, as if to assure herself that he was still with her.

Michael turned to her, his face all joy. "Didn't we know it was in him?" he whispered triumphantly, under cover of the cheering. "We've got him now." He shivered a little. "Listen to them, though."

She had forgotten Harland. Her anxiety was elsewhere. "Michael, this is too much for you. Let's get out, and wait behind. You don't want to hear this next man?"

"No, I don't. I want to talk to you. And I'm tired. Let's escape." He laughed like a boy as they slipped out together through the wings unobserved. They stood in the dark, and behind them they heard the loud voice of the member from town beginning his oration. Celia held her husband's hand between her own; it was burning hot and unsteady.

"Let's go home," she implored him. "You've done enough. You're tired out, and the cold to-day was too much for anyone." She was seriously frightened.

But he would not hear of departure. "Celia darling, you're a goose. What would Francis think if we were gone when he came out to be congratulated? There's a room at the back here where we can wait, and a fire. Listen to

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that cheering." The echoes of it came to them as they stood together.

Celia yielded, and they went to an actor's dressing-room that had been prepared for the speakers. Harland's agent was there, eating a sandwich and talking to Cassilis about the canvassing to be done after the meeting. But the two of them soon went out, and the Dittanys were left together. Michael sat by the fire, looking white and sick, and shivering a little. Celia could not persuade him to eat; but he was intensely excited, and talked of Harland unceasingly. "I don't know whether he'll get in this time, but he'll run them very close. It's a glorious fight. If only it had been mine . . ." He stopped there for a moment, but then he laughed. "Celia, scold me. I've no business to be envious. I've reformed Francis. It's a good record. I'm content." He did not know why she kissed him so passionately.

The meeting ended, and the speakers came in. Harland went straight to Michael. "Your congratulations are what I want," he said, leaving the other men behind him.

"You've got them," Michael told him, shaking his hand.

Celia stood by and watched them both. Harland turned to her, for once unashamed of his own happiness. "You too?"

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"Of course," answered she. Their hands met.

"I gave them Utopia, I'm afraid," said Harland whimsically. "Don't laugh at me. I shall laugh at myself to-morrow, when I read it in the papers."

"We won't laugh . . . to-night," said Celia, almost with appeal.

Harland glanced at her, understood, and released her hand. "I promise I won't laugh to-night," he said to her and Michael, very gently.

The three of them went back to the centre of the room, and Harland accepted congratulations. "That speech ought to get him in," said Cassilis bravely to his neighbour. The agent shrugged his shoulders.

Harland stood near to Letty Underhill in the crowd. It was the first time that he had spoken to her alone since her conversation with Celia, but that he did not know. He saw her troubled face and rebellious mouth. He went quickly to her to find out if he had pleased her. "Did *you* like my speech, Letty?" he asked her under his breath, lest anyone else should hear.

She gave him back a look that checked him. "You made fun of us all quite well."

. . . . . .

Anyone else he would not have forgiven.

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But with Letty two things left him helpless—her youth, that he knew to be so ignorant; and the fact that he did not love her, in spite of all his promises. "She doesn't know how she hurts me," he thought; and "Even that, I suppose, I deserve from her." He said aloud, "I *was* speaking what I felt for once, Letty. Word of honour!" He smiled a little, because he could not, even then, help it.

"I don't believe you," said Letty.

She turned and left him. She was too blind to see where she went, and she did not avoid Robin Cassilis. He stopped her and spoke to her. "Letty, what's the matter? You look tired to death."

She met his eyes. She was very pale, and he saw it. "I've had a long day," said she wearily. He was the only person to whom she could have admitted fatigue. But then she knew that from him she could hide nothing.

"Have you had anything to eat?" demanded Cassilis after a moment. It was strange how the doctor's look wiped out everything else from his face. "When did you get dinner? Six o'clock, I suppose. Come along with me at once."

"I don't want anything," began Letty vexedly.

Cassilis took her by the elbow, and made her walk across the little room to the table

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where food had been set out. "Now then . . ." he said.

Letty shook herself free. "I tell you I don't want anything."

Cassilis said, as he might have said to a boy, "Don't be a little fool." He looked at her steadily. She would not look at him. After a moment he got her a chair and a plate, and stood by her as she ate. They did not talk to each other at any length.

The room emptied a little later, and parties were made up to go home. Letty went with her own people, who had come to the meeting late. Cassilis went alone. The Dittanys and Harland drove away in his car, and the crowd shouted after them. "I wonder which way they'll shout to-morrow," said Harland reflectively, then laughed to himself.

The drive was a silent one, for all three were tired. When they came to the door of the house no one stirred for a moment. Then: "Well, we must go in," said Celia, softly and reluctantly. "What a night it's been!"

They stood in the hall together. "I'm too tired to sit up," confessed Celia. "Don't be long, either of you, will you? You've got to be early in the morning." She gave Harland her hand. "Good-night, Francis. Good luck!" They watched her mount the stairs.

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She turned at the half-landing, and looked down in smiling farewell.

The two men went into the library together, and sat by the fire, talking of the day's events.

"It's been a good fight," said Harland. "I wonder what'll happen. No one seems to be quite sure. Carron is distinctly apprehensive, they tell me." He laughed. "And I myself am not over-confident. I fancy our friend Skinner will be responsible for the result in the end. Now I wonder if I have grovelled sufficiently all round."

Michael grunted. "Can't tell till to-morrow."

"At about this time, I suppose. I see myself on the balcony of the Town Hall, seconding that vote of thanks. I rely on you to stand behind me, and prompt my unaccustomed lips."

"I don't expect they'll need it."

Michael looked into the fire as if he saw something there that pleased him.

"Whatever happens, I'm glad I came here."

Michael nodded gravely.

"And . . . I'm grateful to you for the suggestion," continued Harland, with some difficulty.

Michael said with a laugh, "I wondered at

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the time if you'd ever forgive me. It's a relief that you don't bear malice."

There was a long silence. Then Michael took up the thread of explanation leisurely.

"Interference isn't often justified. At least, that's my theory. But we all forsake our principles once in a lifetime. You were the exception that proved my rule. I couldn't leave you as you were. So I interfered."

"You admit it now?"

"Yes. After all, we understand each other."

A further pause.

"You know my old ambitions." It was Michael speaking again. "I had to give them up. I'm not altogether sorry. I've done other work, and I've been happy. But I've always had the idea of this work at the back of my mind. Now I can leave it to you to carry out." He spoke without any doubt or question. "You'll do it much better, you know, really. And I shall hear of your glories, and take credit to myself." He turned, smiling, and looked at Harland for the first time in the interview. And Harland rose to his feet, standing as a soldier stands when his orders are given him.

"If not this time, then next time, and all your life long," said Michael. "If I don't see it, I shall hear of it." Harland grasped that meaning, and it did not seem strange to him,

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though he had few beliefs of immortality and the like. Religion is a matter of moments. In this moment Harland knew that, dead or living, Michael's spirit would be with him always. "You'll work now," said Michael. "That's what I shall take with me when I go. It's good salvage. I'm content."

Harland said, "I promise."

Michael rose to his feet. "I knew it was all right when I heard you speak to-night," said he.

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XVI

THE CLIMAX

NEXT day was polling day. The division was not particularly large, and it was expected that the result would be declared before midnight. Harland left the house early, in a car flutteringly decorated with scarlet ribbons. Celia laughed at him from the doorway. "You look like a prize animal with that rosette and the placard," and he returned, "Wish me a first, then. Is my expression sufficiently ingratiating? I'll meet you and Michael in Greywall at eleven." He drove away. Celia went indoors, her face grave again now that she was alone. "I don't wonder that Letty's excited over these things. Oh, I do hope he manages it! If only one could do more to help. . . . It's not much fun being a woman, after all. You're so out of it when they're fighting." She was suddenly amused at herself. "Am I developing feminist tendencies now? Should I like to live on platforms, in Letty's manner? No, I shouldn't. I'm only madly, bitterly, furiously

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jealous of the right she's got to help Francis. Whatever happens to-night, he's hers. If he wins, he'll thank her; if he loses, she'll have to comfort him. And she doesn't know how. She'll only think of herself. She'll tease him and torment him just when he can't bear another word. And I shall have to stand by and do nothing. That's what's the matter really." She went to the breakfast-room, where her husband was. "Michael," she said, "I don't like elections after all. I wish it was over, and we were at home again."

He kissed her. "Hold up a day longer, Celia. We shall want you to help us to-night, whichever way it goes."

She clung to him for a moment, as if he were all the strength she had in the world, then straightened herself. "Yes, we'll go through with it. It's our last day. At eleven in Greywall. We'll go and do all we can to get him in."

"Bribery and corruption," agreed Michael. "It *is* a pity you can't wear red."

They met Harland at the appointed time, and drove with him round the various committee-rooms. It was bitter weather, and not a day to go into the streets for choice. Celia became more than anxious about Michael. The alternation between heated, crowded rooms and the freezing air out of doors was sure to try him; and he had alarmed her overnight.

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But he would not hear of going home. They lunched hastily off coffee and sandwiches at the house of some supporter, and then drove across country to a village near Letty's home, where Carron had too much influence. Coming back they fetched Letty herself. She had been out canvassing all day, and had come in for a non-descript meal. She was unwilling to join them: "You're only wasting your time and a car driving round like this. And we've not too many cars." But Harland persuaded her. She drove back into Greywall, sitting with him at the front of the car. Celia, behind with Michael, watched the two; and noticed that they spoke little at first, but afterwards eagerly. Letty's red veil fluttered towards Harland; she was very animated. Celia supposed that they were anticipating the result, which it was now thought might be favourable. She turned away herself, and looked at Michael. He smiled, but his pallor frightened her. She blamed herself for not forbidding the fatigues of this last day. The evening air was colder than death; and Michael's bare hand, under the rug, shook with fever in her own. "You oughtn't to have come," she whispered.

He teased her whimsically. "Goose-girl Celia! I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

They drove back through the lighted streets of Greywall to the Castle Inn, where they were

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to dine before Harland went out again for the last hour of the poll. They went up to a certain panelled room on the first floor, overlooking the market. Harland walked to the window. It was unshuttered, and blue with the night outside. "There's the Town Hall opposite," he remarked, with more obviousness than he usually permitted himself. There was a note of apprehension in his voice, and Celia caught it. She longed to run to him, and comfort him. Instead, she waited by the fire, watching Letty stroll across to follow his look.

"Those men of Skinner's are the real trouble," said Letty reflectively.

Celia saw Harland touch the girl's hand where it hung at her side. "It'll be all over in less than five hours. Do you think we shall do it, dear?"

Letty's answer was inaudible. Celia, rather white, had turned her head away. After a moment she went to Michael, where he sat warming himself, and, standing beside him, said in an undertone, "You won't go out again?"

He looked up. "I can't miss the end of it all. It won't hurt me." But he spoke with less than his usual conviction.

"I daren't let you go," returned Celia, under her breath; and a moment later, "Michael, don't leave me."

She knew that he heard the terror in her

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voice. But he replied lightly, "You and Johnstone are a pair of alarmists. Well, I give in. But you'll have to get your own forgiveness from Francis if I leave him alone at the Town Hall."

The others came back from the window, and dinner was served. Quatermaine, Cassilis, and the agent came in before it ended, and fetched Harland away. Time was going fast, and the candidate must be seen in the streets. "Very well," said Harland. "If you drag me by force from this delectable meal, I must submit." He had eaten nothing, as Celia saw. He finished a glass of wine, standing. "Michael, to the charge once more."

"He can't go out again in this weather," said Celia in a low voice.

Harland turned. Her fear was born again in his eyes. He stood a moment; then bent his head, and yielded. "You're right. I'd no business to suggest it. I'll come back directly I can . . . afterwards." He made some light joke with Michael, and followed the other men to the door. Letty was waiting there for him.

"Good-bye," Celia heard. "I wish I needn't leave you."

"You'll do it all right?" muttered Letty impatiently.

He hesitated. "I don't know. I think I shall. You'll wait for me till I come back?"

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She looked at him with the eyes of a child that is afraid. He took her in his arms and kissed her, very gently. Celia had never seen him do it in public before. Then he went out and shut the door behind him.

The room was quiet for a very long time. Letty sat by the window, in spite of the cold, and looked out at the market. The Dittanys kept to the fireside. Michael's cheeks were very bright and flushed. He talked now and again of the chances of the fight. Celia, sitting at his knees, watched his face. After a while he too fell silent altogether. There came a long pause, and in it the sound of St. Luke's bell, striking eight.

"It's over now, then, one way or the other," said Michael, after a little.

"Oh, he must win!" Celia cried.

Letty said nothing.

A little later Cassilis came in for a moment. He brought the outer air with him; there were a few flakes of snow on his shoulders, and his face had little colour in it. He looked like a man who is chilled to the bone. He could, of course, give no news. Harland and the rest had gone on to the Town Hall, and he must follow them before the doors of the counting-room were closed. He had no idea of what the result would be, but thought that Harland stood a good chance. "After all, it was only

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a four-hundred majority last time, and that was three years ago. The town's changed a good deal since then."

"And you've all worked so hard," said Celia, pitying him.

Cassilis winced. "Yes, we've done that." All the time he was looking at Letty, as a dog does at its master. Celia understood that he had only come back for the chance of seeing the girl again. If Harland were really to succeed, any hopes that a rival might have entertained must vanish. Cassilis, trying to talk readily, watched Letty all the time, and fell silent when she looked at him. For some unexplained reason the girl treated him abominably. In a very few minutes: "You'll be shut out if you don't go soon," said she. "And then you'll miss the first hearing of the result." Her tone made it evident that she knew what the result must mean to him, and implied that she did not care.

The young doctor drew himself together then, and "I'll go," he returned briefly. He took leave of Celia and her husband, and went out without noticing Letty again. The girl—Celia remembered it afterwards—walked towards the door that had closed behind him, and stood near it for a moment. There was a puzzled expression of regret on her face. Then it faded, and she laughed, but not as if

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anything amused her. She drew her hand across her eyes with an effect of rousing herself from sleep, and returned to her post at the window.

A very long time went by. Michael sat quiet in his chair. Celia, crouched beside him, stared into the fire. The coals made pictures for her, sleepy and glowing. She held Michael's fingers between her own and dreamed of many things. The world stood back from her for a little; time had no meaning, and sorrow lost its bitterness. She heard one hour strike and then another, and at last a third. She did not move. She was afraid to break the charm that held the room silent, and bring in noise again.

Letty moved at last. "It's getting very late," she said, half aloud, "and the market's quite full."

Michael turned in his chair. Celia rose to her knees, and then to her feet. She looked at the clock. "It can't be much longer now," said Michael.

They were all nervous now that the end had come so close. They did not talk much. Celia picked up a fur coat and carried it to the window. Michael followed her. The three stood close together. "Put this on," murmured Celia. "It's awfully cold." Michael obeyed. The window was one of those

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common in Georgian buildings, bowed and standing out from the wall. The panes fitted badly, and the air was blowing through them. Celia wondered how Letty could have sat there so long.

The market below was all lit up, and full of people, in spite of the hour. The snow was not coming down now, and the night was very still and bitter. The street lamps burnt brightly among blue shadows. The windows of the Town Hall were yellow, and so was the clock above them. The crowd swayed this way and that; and the sound of it came up, deadened by the closed panes, to the three watchers. It made a long, continuous note of expectancy.

"They can't be much longer now," said Michael again.

Celia shivered with excitement and cold. "It's rather awful waiting, isn't it?" they heard her say.

Letty was very upright, looking through the window. She never spoke from this time until after the result was out.

"They'll come to that window opposite," Michael said.

"Over the portico?"

"Yes."

"Shall we hear what they say, all this distance off?"

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"I don't expect the crowd'll let us. But you'll know who's in, of course, from the order they stand in."

"How do they stand?"

Michael did not answer. He was leaning forward. "Open the window," he said suddenly. Letty took hold of the sash and raised it almost before she heard the order. The night air came in, taking away the breath, so cold was it; and with it came the shout of the crowd. Celia's little cry was lost in it, as was the exclamation of Michael, "They're coming." And across the market a lighted window was suddenly obscured. Celia could not distinguish the figures there, nor hear if any words were spoken. But she heard the sudden, mighty roar of the people, and turning, she saw her own companions' faces. Michael neither spoke nor smiled; in his look was something that his wife did not understand. Letty's hands were at her throat . . . she was tragedy itself. "He's failed," she said. Celia heard her through everything. "It's all over."

Michael said, "Sixteen. There'll scarcely be a recount. It's not worth while. They're careful enough, these men. But I should just have liked to see him win." Celia scarcely heard the remark at the time.

Letty had turned away, and was walking slowly up and down the room. Celia knew

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that she did this sometimes when she was thinking deeply. She had her hands behind her, and her head was bent forward. She seemed quite unconscious of what she was doing. She paced mechanically backwards and forwards in a certain space, and did not look up.

Celia found that Michael had shut the window, and was leading her away from it. "Francis 'll be back here in a little while," said he. "We shall be wanted."

She put her hand through his arm, and they went back to the fire together.

After a certain time they heard footsteps outside the room. Letty came to a stop, and waited. She stood quite upright in the middle of an open space, and she looked at the door as if she feared what might come in. Celia watched it also. With her there was only the eagerness of compassion. She longed for the defeated man to come, in order that she might do what she could to help him. And Michael sat quite quiet. His face was very peaceful, almost it might have been thought that he smiled.

The door opened, and Harland appeared.

When he found the three of them waiting for him he stopped short. Celia saw his look turn straight to Michael, with that unhesitating confidence which subsisted between them.

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Evidently he did not fear Michael's verdict. "It's all right, isn't it?" he seemed to appeal, and had the unspoken affirmation that he sought. He glanced at Celia herself, with arched eyebrows demanding pity and encouragement. Then he went where he must. "I'm sorry, Letty," they heard him say to the girl who had not come to meet him.

She pulled her hands away from his. "What's the use? You've not done it. Oh! I thought you were sure to win!" She broke down at last, crying helplessly, and went to her old place at the window, where she stood, leaning her forehead against the glass. Celia heard her struggle in vain against the sobs that shook her.

Harland did not follow, perhaps because he would have found it difficult to console Letty in the presence of two onlookers. But to Celia it seemed more likely that he was too tired for further effort. She had seen his face change when Letty turned from him. He stood where he was. A gesture that he had begun to make ended in two hands falling at his sides. He said nothing; only Celia saw his eyes close for a moment, as if he longed for sleep. Then he roused himself with a perceptible effort, and assumed an expression of rueful patience that wrinkled his forehead. Of a sudden Celia could contain herself no

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longer. She ran to him, and cried, "Oh, Francis, it *was* bad luck! But you'll do it next time. Don't stand there. You look so tired! Come and sit down."

She led him across to the fire. He did not resist her. He sat down in a chair, and did not speak for a moment. Letty, out by the window, was still crying a little, resentfully and alone. Celia stood looking down at the two men. She felt that they neither of them recognised her presence. The result of their work was before them; and they examined it, forgetting her, as men will. To Harland the only thing that mattered at all in the world was Michael's approval. He waited for that to be put into words before he could rest.

And Michael said, "You've done more than ever I expected. You'll keep it up now, won't you? There'll be a general election before this year's out. You ought to beat Carron easily then." He spoke slowly, with pauses between his words, as if he found it difficult to assemble them.

Harland laughed—a strange sound to hear in that room, after what had happened. Celia could tell that Michael had awarded him for everything, and taken away all his fatigue. "You've saved my soul, Michael," he said. "I shan't go back now."

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Michael answered, "Then I've done all I wanted."

Harland stood up. "I shall sleep well to-night," he told Celia, stretching himself lazily. "Shan't you?"

She laughed, and rubbed her eyes with her knuckles like a sleepy child. "Shan't we all? But oh! what fun it's been!"

"Hasn't it? And I never knew what the secret was before. Oh, I'm much more ignorant than I thought!"

"You'll learn now."

"Of course I shall. I've no further complaint to make against the world." He raised his voice. "Letty, my child, it's time we went home. Your father's just coming up to look for you."

There was a knock at the door. Harland called, "Come in."

Colonel Underhill appeared, with the agent, and Cassilis, and several others. There were regrets, but of a congratulatory kind, since Harland had really gone beyond all expectations. "Till next time!" said old Mr. Quatermaine, and was echoed on all sides. It was half an hour before the party dispersed. They bade many farewells. At last remained only Harland, the Dittanys, the Underhills, and Robin Cassilis.

"We must go," said Letty's father. "Come along, my dear."

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She followed him to the door. Harland went with her, and would have spoken again, but she escaped him quickly and nervously. He turned, to meet a look from young Cassilis that set him thinking. "I'm going too," was all the doctor said, however. "It's late . . . or early . . . and I've work to do to-morrow of a different kind." He also looked wearied out.

"It's time we departed," said Harland. "Hurry up, Celia."

She was drawing on her gloves. "I'm coming. How queer it feels to have everything over at last. Michael, are you ready?"

"And waiting," Michael returned. "I'm glad it's finished, aren't you?"

He rose to his feet. Harland, who had turned to pick up some papers, heard Celia say laughingly, "Not me! I hate things to come to an end," heard also the change in her voice on the last word, and her sudden gasp of fear. Behind him Cassilis made some sort of exclamation. He looked up, and saw Michael swaying queerly.

"An end . . ." said Michael, in the voice of one who dreams. "Francis . . ." He took a step forward, uncertainly, and appeared to stumble over something unseen.

Harland caught him in his arms. Cassilis said, "Has he fainted? Let me look," and

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Celia, "Oh, how thankful I am you weren't gone!" Harland heard them both from a great distance, or so it seemed to him. And he felt Michael's weight against him, heavy and unresponsive, like the weight of the body of a dead man.

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XVII

THE DAY AFTER

At nine o'clock next morning Letty Underhill was still in her bedroom. She had not slept well after the fatigues and disappointment of the election day, and even her youth bore the marks of it, in heavy eyelids and pale cheeks. She dressed slowly, unwilling to face the inquiries of her people, who would both, she supposed, try to console her for Harland's failure. Letty was vexed and sullen; she did not wish to be approached by anyone until she had decided on her future course of action, which was puzzling her. She loitered, refusing to watch the clock.

There came a tap at her door, and a maid, consciously dramatic, who said, "Will you come down, miss, Mrs. Underhill says? Doctor Cassilis wishes to speak to you."

Letty started, then forgot other emotions in surprise. "Doctor Cassilis? Now?"

The girl offered no explanation, but she was evidently disturbed by something. Letty caught fear from her; then became haughty,

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as her manner was when nervous. "I'll come as soon as I'm ready. Tell him to wait." She was left alone, and looked at her own face in the glass. Its discomposure startled her; she reddened, and seemed angry. "I can't hurry," she said aloud.

Five minutes later Robin Cassilis, waiting in the dining-room with Mrs. Underhill by the remains of the family breakfast, heard the door open behind him. He stopped his disjointed conversation. Letty came in, and offered him a timid hand, quickly withdrawn. She was looking both tired and out of humour; but to blind Robin she seemed, as always, distractingly sweet and unattainable. His speech failed him. He stood silent before her; and from far away he heard Mrs. Underhill's voice.

"Oh! Letty, Letty, Michael's ill. They want you to go. Robin can't get a nurse. What shall we do? I was afraid. He ought not to have done all he has these last weeks. Michael . . ." She was not a strong woman, and she was not young. Her face worked; she held out her arms to her daughter as if she wanted help.

Robin Cassilis watched Letty. He saw her eyelids quiver, and her breast rise and fall with the long breath she drew as she heard the news. She glanced at him for confirmation. Then, meeting his look, she straightened her-

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self, and assumed quiet. Her lips and eyes were steady as those of a marble figure. Robin Cassilis alone, of all who knew her, had seen her thus before. He could have prophesied her courage. Across all doubt and resentment his spirit leapt to hers, forgetting injuries. "I knew you'd come," he said.

She answered him, "Yes, I'll come with you, Robin."

Mrs. Underhill was crying quietly. Letty turned to her. "Mother darling, don't; it'll be all right. I'll go in a minute, of course. Robin knows. He'll look after Michael for us."

Robin Cassilis stood, his face twisted as if he were in pain. The girl turned to him.

"What is it? I thought Michael looked bad last night; but we were all too excited to notice other people much." Her voice, sweet and childlike, seemed to ask pardon for other neglects than the one she spoke of. "He's worked very hard, I know; and he's not strong. We Underhills are all rather crocks." She spread out her own fragile hands as if in apology.

The young doctor answered, "He collapsed last night, just as we were all going away. We thought it was his heart at first. Mrs. Dittany tells me it's weak. You knew that, of course?"

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Letty shook her head. "I never was told. But you mean there's something else as well."

Robin Cassilis hesitated for a second, then went on: "I'm afraid so. You see, he's been everywhere these last few days in that open car, and he's not the type to stand cold. He must have been in a high fever all yesterday evening. I can't think how I was such a fool as not to see anything." He stopped, biting his lip.

Letty walked up to him, and touched his arm gently. "There was a good deal to think of."

He stood a moment, gathering himself together.

"Tell me what makes you afraid for him," said she.

He answered, "It's developed into pneumonia now."

There was a long silence.

"Where is he?" asked Letty.

"At the Castle Inn. We couldn't take him back in the car at night, in that weather. We were lucky to get another room. The place was full, because of the election. Harland had to drive back home. Mrs. Dittany and I stayed to look after your brother."

"But then—you've been up all night," interrupted Letty, eyeing him.

"It was better not to leave him. There wasn't," with a faint smile, "much of the night

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left. But he got easier towards morning. Then I went home and changed, and came off for you. I've telegraphed for a nurse from the County Hospital. But she can't be over till this afternoon. And Mrs. Dittany can't manage alone, though she's splendid at it." He talked hurriedly, to divert symptoms of emotional gratitude on the part of Mrs. Underhill. "If you'd go for a day or two and help. . . . We can get a room for you now things are quieter in Greywall."

"Why didn't you send Francis?" demanded Letty.

Cassilis stopped as if shot. Letty's tone had been very strange. She gave no explanation of her speech, but turned away and walked once across the room, and back again. Then she came back.

"Sit down and eat something, Robin," she said quietly. "I must get a few things out, if I'm to go and stop at the inn. You're fit to drop. Look after yourself, please. I shall be ready in twenty minutes. May I order the car, mother?"

"I came over in mine," said Cassilis. "I'll drive you back, if you can really be so quick."

She considered him. "Very well. Don't drink black coffee. Your nerves are in rags already. Look at your hand." It was indeed shaking so much that the coffee had been spilt

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as the young man tried to obey her earlier counsels. "This is a curious prospect for your patients," said Letty, with an abrupt laugh that was more like a sob. "I don't want to nurse you as well."

She set a chair for Cassilis, and put food before him, as he had done for her on the night of Harland's meeting. He wondered if she remembered that. Then she took her mother away. Cassilis heard her comforting Mrs. Underhill as the door closed on them. He sat staring before him. After a moment, he put his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands.

Some time later, Letty returned alone. "I'm ready, if you are," she told him.

He sprang up. She came over to the table. "Have you been good?" she inquired, with a faint smile. He had eaten nothing, and she saw it. "I hope my other patient 'll behave better," said she. Her voice was pitiful in its attempt at mirth. The young doctor made some inarticulate sound of distress. Letty said abruptly, "Is he very bad?"

Robin Cassilis did not answer. Letty came closer, dumbly imploring the assurance he could not give. "I'm afraid so," he told her, knowing that she relied on him for the truth. "It's early to give an opinion, of course. You don't generally get any crisis before the

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fifth or sixth day. But—I'm afraid of his heart."

Letty stared up at his troubled face. What she saw there broke down her courage. She clung to him, not crying, but shaking from head to foot, and feeling for his hand. When he yielded it, she held to it as if she feared to let him go. "Oh! Robin, Robin, it can't be true."

He cried out protestingly, "Letty, don't; we'll get him through, somehow. I'm sure we shall."

She turned her head to look up at him. He was very pale, and held himself back by some kind of effort. When he saw that she was quieter he took his hand away from hers. She drew herself up, standing straight and white-faced, a piteous little figure. "Why should you have to do all this?" she asked, with sudden bitterness. "It's not your work. It's Francis's."

Getting no answer for a moment, she said, "Robin . . ." in an appealing, frightened voice.

Cassilis broke out: "I'm sorry I interfered. There was no one else to come. Harland didn't know you'd be wanted. I could get here quicker than we could fetch and send him. Of course I knew you wouldn't want me; you don't want anyone now but him." He stopped

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himself there, and, with a struggle, added, "I apologise. That's no business of mine. Shall we go?"

Letty stood still a moment, then came slowly towards him. He waited, but he shrank back a little from her. There were tears on those black lashes of hers, that he dared not see. "Robin," she began, in a voice that he had not often heard, "I'm very sorry I said that. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She made a timid movement towards him. It appeared that he did not see it. "I'm not vexed with you," she said. "You've been too good to me. You always are." The young doctor frowned. "I couldn't have borne," said Letty, "to hear this news from anyone else."

Cassilis answered roughly, "I thought you said Harland should have brought it."

Letty winced, but held her ground. "Francis claims very few of his privileges. You must have seen that."

"It makes you angry that he doesn't," was wrung from Cassilis.

She took a step back. "You're unkind, now, Robin."

He replied shortly, "I don't often cry out when you get your scalpel into me. I'm here for you to experiment on. But you've gone pretty deep lately." He could not look at her. He heard her say, "I've hurt myself too,

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Robin." He made no answer, because he could not trust himself. Letty drew a quick breath that was almost a sob.

"Have I been so happy?" she said, as if to herself. "Francis cares very little about me. He's shared none of his thoughts with me in all this time. I haven't been allowed to help him. I'm finding out my mistake."

Cassilis interrupted, "Be careful what you're saying, Letty." He appeared to her absolutely unsympathetic; she thought that she had never hated him more.

"There's no need to be careful," she retorted, with a sob. "I can say anything I like, and not exaggerate. Francis never loved me. He was tired of me before we were engaged. He only asked me to marry him because Celia told him he ought."

The young doctor's look frightened her; she stopped short. "You believe that?" asked he.

Her anger failed her, and she began to whimper. "It's true. Celia told me by mistake. I thought he meant what he said; but he didn't. He was laughing at me all the time."

"That's not true," Robin contradicted, "and you've no right to say it."

"And what business have you to defend him? I suppose you'd have done the same."

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Cassilis made a quick movement; then checked himself, and did not please the girl by his self-control. "Don't talk nonsense, Letty," he commanded.

"I hate him, and I hate you, and I shall break off the engagement!"

"You won't."

"Why shouldn't I?" She faced him as though he were an enemy.

"Because you're still in love with him."

Cassilis paused a moment, then went on: "You're jealous about him still . . . you can be angry when he forgets you . . . you want to help him. It all means the one thing. I wish it didn't, for my own sake. But it can't be helped. Your duty's plain enough. You've chosen Harland, and you must stick to him. You can't drop him now, just when he's in his worst trouble, because he hasn't time to make pretty speeches to you. You've had everything done for you, so far. Now you'll have to begin and do something for yourself, if you want to succeed. You can't go on being a selfish child all your life."

He stopped, because not all his conviction of the truth-telling that Letty needed for her happiness could enable him to watch her suffering any longer.

"Do you suppose I shall ever want to speak to you again after this?" asked Letty, standing

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up to him with a piteous defiance that tore at his heart.

Cassilis replied, "I don't expect so. But if I can make you see reason . . ."

He saw her lips begin to tremble. "Are we going to quarrel with each other *to-day*?" said Letty, with a child's misery.

She took Cassilis' strength from him. He seized those cold, small hands of hers, implored her pardon, reproached himself—"How could I talk like that to you?"

In the end it was Letty who comforted him, wistfully. "Robin, I'm not hurt. I did understand. You're the only person who cares enough for me to scold me. Sometimes I wish you'd done it oftener. I might have grown up into someone worth while. I'm no use."

Robin Cassilis made an answer that contradicted his former lecture.

"Francis doesn't believe that of me," Letty said. "He thinks what you think, that I'm a selfish child, who'll never grow up." A childish courage held back her tears, but could not repress the cry, "Oh! if growing up means unhappiness, I'm getting it to-day, all together."

Robin comforted her. "We all want you to-day. You can help us as no one else can. Your brother's ill, and there's no other person

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I'd trust to nurse him as you will. Be a brave girl, Letty. I'm waiting for you."

She drew herself up after a pause. "I'll come now, Robin. Tell me all you want me to do as we go."

He drove her into Greywall. They talked as they went. "You must be very good, Letty, and very sensible. Mrs. Dittany's splendid, but she hasn't your training, and she's frightened. I can't let her do much. I must be able to depend on you until we get the nurse from the Hospital; and afterwards you must help her. You've nursed this thing before, haven't you?"

Letty had; and remembered the details of her cases clearly enough. He and she were steadily technical together during the drive. Cassilis dared not show her the pity that agonised him as he watched her efforts at self-control. He drove recklessly. Letty sat close beside him, and the scarlet ends of her veil blew across his hands.

They came to the market-place, which was almost deserted. Cassilis saw Letty turn her head to look up at the windows of the Town Hall as they drove by. He imagined that she was thinking of Harland, and he did not speak to her. They drew up at the door of the inn. He helped Letty down. Her fingers clung to his as he did so. He took her in, and up the dark stairs. They entered

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the room where the events of the night before had taken place. It was empty. Cassilis closed the door.

Letty took off her furs, and laid them on the table. Cassilis watched her. She paused and looked at him. He saw a change come over her face. She returned to him. Those groping fingers of hers seemed to implore his help. Her lips were so near that he could have kissed them.

"Robin . . ." she murmured, under her breath. She appealed for something from him; he could not, or would not, understand her.

"Let me go, Letty," he whispered. "I must tell them you've come."

Letty withdrew herself from him, and walked over to the far side of the room. She stood as he had seen her stand the night before, looking out upon the market-place. He turned away from her small, lonely figure, and went to the door that opened on the inner room. Letty heard him knock gently.

The door opened, and Celia Dittany came out, shutting it behind her.

"You've been very quick," she said to Cassilis. There was the strain of waiting in her voice. "I didn't think you could have got there so soon."

"Letty was very good," responded Cassilis. "She scarcely kept me a quarter of an hour."

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Letty turned round from the window. If she had shed any tears they were dried now. Her face was quiet; she looked very young and innocent, almost as if she were in a dream. She came across the room to the others.

Celia thought that she had never seen a human being more removed from fear. It was as if Letty knew with absolute certainty that Michael would recover. There was a divine exaltation in the girl's look. Celia clung to her.

"Oh, Letty, how glad I am you came! I don't know what I should have done without someone to help me."

Letty looked beyond her at Cassilis. The three were silent for a moment.

"Shall I get ready now," said Letty then, "and go to him at once?"

She was taken to the room that had been found for her. Cassilis and Celia Dittany waited for her about ten minutes. They talked a little, disjointedly, as people do in the shadow of a crisis. Celia was nervous, the young doctor very tired. He gave her a few directions as to the nursing. "I'm so thankful to have Letty," she said again.

"I think she'll be a great help to you," replied Cassilis. "She's an excellent nurse, as I know from training her. It's a waste to have her doing other things."

"That's true," said Celia. "But a good

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deal of fine material goes to waste in this world." She thought of Michael, struggling hour by hour for the life that was being choked out of him. "Why should this happen to him, of all people?" The question had come back again, and she could not answer it.

"I wonder if you're right?" said Cassilis, and was not heard. He fell again to thoughts of Letty, whom he could have made into what he believed her to be.

They waited a little longer.

Letty came back. She stood in the doorway. Cassilis saw that she had on the uniform she had worn in the days when she worked under him. The blue cotton frock, the white apron, made her look very slender and childish; her hair was hidden under a cap, as when he had seen her first. He remembered everything about her so clearly that the memory was pain.

She came forward. "I'm ready now. I'll go to him. Are you coming too, Robin?" Her voice lingered unconsciously on the name, and Celia heard it.

"Yes, I'll come," said Robin Cassilis, with an effort.

Letty went towards the inner room on light, silent feet. Cassilis followed her. To Celia it appeared that he stumbled a little, as if he did not know where he was going. Letty and he

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stood together at the door, and he opened it for her. Celia saw him look down at the girl, and his face was drawn like that of a hungry man. Letty went by him, grave, innocent, and, as it seemed, unconscious. And Celia heard, through that open door, the heavy breathing which had filled her night with fear. She thought it sounded a little worse.

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XVIII

FRANCIS'S PRICE

HARLAND came to the inn before the morning was half over. Celia met him in the outer room, and told him of Michael's state. They were very calm. The anxiety in both of them was too deep for words. It betrayed itself only through a movement of the head, a falling note in the voice, a silence where speech should have been. Francis was in an agony of self-reproach, Celia sick with fear. Yet they dared not comfort each other, because it seemed an acknowledgment of Michael's danger.

"The doctor says we must keep up his strength as much as we can. He's been telling me things to do."

"Cassilis is an admirable man at all times, and quite invaluable where his profession is concerned."

Celia could have wept over the dreary tone that spoke what should have been light and careless words. She tried to play her own part better. "I'm very glad to have him.

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We shall all need to be grateful to him." She stopped short, then achieved, "He's done so much to help your election, too." Her eyes were tragic as she tried to forget Michael in some other subject. Harland gave her little help.

"Oh! my election . . ." He dismissed it without a word.

"Do things seem flat to-day, now it's all over?" The last words seemed to take to themselves a grim significance when they were spoken.

"Nothing matters much," responded Harland. "Except . . ." He did not finish that sentence either, but looked towards the door of Michael's room, as a dog looks when you shut him out.

"We've sent for Letty to help us, you know," Celia told him, not daring to watch that unconscious self-betrayal.

"I didn't."

"Doctor Cassilis went for her this morning," Celia ran on, dreading silence. "She's trained, you see, and he likes to work with her. I'm so ignorant, and so afraid of making mistakes." She could not get any further.

Harland withdrew his gaze from the door whose opening he seemed at once to desire and to dread. "If there were anything one could do for him . . . I think I am jealous of Cassilis." His smile was not a mirthful thing.

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"I know I'm jealous of Letty," began Celia, with a valiant attempt to follow him. But her humour, such as it was, came to nothing. Abruptly she gave up the pretence. "Oh, Francis, he's ill . . . and I can't help him!"

Francis Harland was white-faced, and calm only by a great effort. "I regret that I never had any medical training. Doctors are the only men who justify their existence." He was standing at one side of the table; Celia, on the other, had dropped into a chair, as if she could stand no longer. She looked up at him with so much wild misery that his affectations were torn from him. "It's been all my fault," he said sombrely. "Michael came here to help me . . . to drive me into doing my duty. He wore himself out over my wretched affairs. I took him into the cold and the excitement of it all. I shall have killed him . . ." His voice went from him absolutely, as if it had been choked in his throat.

Celia stretched out her hands to him. "He won't die . . . he can't. I couldn't bear it." She had never seen Harland's face as it was now.

"Who knows what we may have to bear?" he said.

She only just heard him; but she heard him call Michael by name afterwards under his breath, with so much grief and helplessness

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that it pierced through her own terrors. She sprang to her feet. Harland was scarcely conscious of what she did. He stood immovable, not looking at her. She put her arms round him. "Francis, help me!" she whispered.

Her appeal steadied him as nothing else might have done. He turned away from the door of the bedroom, and made her sit in a chair where she could rest. He took his place beside her. They talked in undertones, as they had done throughout, for fear of being heard on the other side of that closed door.

"Francis, you mustn't think as you are doing. You mustn't give up hope. He can't be taken from us. We need him too much."

Harland fought for his own voice. "There's no doing without him." Celia scarcely recognised it when it came. "He gave me my life back again after I'd thrown it away. I suppose this is my price. He's paying it for me. It wasn't worth while . . ." Celia might have thought him calm but for the agonised unrest of his fingers, gripping each other as he spoke.

She put by her own trouble to quiet those tortured hands. "Francis, you may say anything else, but not that. He wouldn't wish it . . . you would make him unhappy. He loved you. He was so glad, so thankful that he could do what he did for you. He told me

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that over and over. He thought that you would carry out the work he'd failed in."

Harland flung back, "*He* never failed in anything."

She did not reproach him for a childish violence. "If you succeed, won't it count for him?" she whispered.

A long shiver ran through Harland's body. Celia felt it as she sat beside him. Whatever thought he had found utterance only in the repetition of Michael's name. "Oh! don't I lose everything too?" she said under her breath.

Harland looked at her as an animal does when it suffers.

"Do you remember," said she, "how you came down to Marshdikes first? It's such a little time ago really, and yet it seems so long. I have been wondering . . . to-day . . . if we four shall ever be together there again."

"Not as we were, whatever comes."

"No. We laughed then, didn't we?" Her voice was sharp with pain. "I think I've forgotten how to laugh now. And if Michael dies I shall never learn again." She was clinging to Harland, all her strength gone. "Francis, I can't bear it! Is he going to die? Oh! he couldn't leave me alone. My darling! . . ."

Harland found his own strength in comforting her.

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A little later he had sight of Letty. She came through the inner door on some errand. Harland scarcely realised her presence for the moment. He was thinking of her as she had been the night before. He had never seen her with the quiet look in her face that Cassilis taught her, and she seemed strange to him. She went by him with her hands full, carrying things she had needed for Michael. Her head was down-bent; she walked carefully, so as to let nothing fall. Harland caught a faint odour of some drug, that frightened him. Letty had gone through the room before he found words in which to speak to her.

She came back a moment later. She appeared to see Harland for the first time, and a little colour touched her pale cheeks. He heard her pronounce his name. Then she came up to him. "You've been here long?"

"I came early. I couldn't wait at home and know nothing."

She bent her head, her grave eyes fixed upon him. "You'll look after Celia for me?" Celia was sitting by the table, out of ear-shot.

"I promise to do that." Harland was grave and obedient to a person unknown. He had never seen this Letty Underhill

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before, and did not realise her. He was bitterly envious of her, because she could help Michael, whilst he was helpless. He had no other thought of her.

She went back to the door of the room. He made as if to follow her, then checked himself. She did not turn. He saw her lay her hand on the latch of the door, and his own heart seemed to stop beating. The door opened. As it swung wide he looked into the room beyond, yet saw nothing that he could afterwards remember. He heard, or fancied he heard, some sound from its inmate, but did not know what it had been. Letty vanished; the door closed. Harland went back to Celia, who sat in her place. Her eyes still had the direction that his had given up.

"We're no use," said he.

She put up her hands to his. He saw the tears on her cheeks as a thing that scarcely moved him. He himself was in that trouble which is beyond tears or any relief. If he could have died to give Michael a moment's quiet breathing, he would have done so willingly.

Cassilis came again in the late afternoon, and brought the night-nurse from town. Celia Dittany went with her to another room. Harland, waiting, heard Cassilis and Letty speak together of Michael. He did not understand what they said, but it disturbed him. Their

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faces were grave, their voices full of fear. Letty's gentle serenity wavered, Cassilis was haggard. He too, like all who knew Michael, had loved him. They murmured together by the window. Harland heard, "Solid . . . racing up . . . no strength." It was all charged with a horrible, nightmare meaning; the whispers seemed to go on for ever. "All our life stops here," thought Harland. "We shall none of us ever be quite the same people again." He had no doubt now but that Michael would die. . . .

Cassilis departed. The short winter afternoon closed in, and the windows turned from blue to black. The room was lit by a fire. Celia and Harland sat by it, waiting still. Celia had been with her husband for a little time, but could do nothing for him, and had been urged to leave him to Letty and the nurse. His struggle continued, with intervals of exhaustion. It was possible, even outside that closed door, to hear his deep, gasping breath. He was in high fever, and apparently unconscious of any person near him. He fought through choked lungs for his life, and time went slowly to those who watched him. Celia lay in her chair by the fire. She looked utterly wearied out. It was as if her strength drained from her as Michael's from him. Harland sat by her. He could do nothing for her. He had

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never felt such impotence as now overwhelmed him. The evening went by, slowly.

About half-past nine Cassilis came, and stopped to talk for a few minutes, extremely gently, to Michael's wife.

Harland stood by in great wretchedness. "If I could help at all . . ." he heard his own voice say.

Cassilis nodded, grave and preoccupied. "You can do most here, if you will."

Celia murmured, "Francis, don't leave me!" Her courage and laughter were all gone now.

The trained nurse came out of the sick-room. She was a tall, middle-aged woman in grey and white. She glanced at all three of them, then went straight to Cassilis. "Doctor . . ." they heard her say. She drew him to the far side of the room, speaking quickly. Cassilis frowned as he listened. When she had done, he followed her to the door. They went into Michael's room together. Celia and Harland waited a long time. He held her hand in his. Her fingers were ice-cold and a dead weight, like those of someone unconscious.

Letty came out of Michael's room. She left the door ajar behind her, and the watchers heard a little noise within. Letty was much distressed, she came to Celia and whispered with her. Harland could not tell what they

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said. He was not calm enough to listen. But he heard, a few moments later, Cassilis call out from the inner room, "Letty, we want you."

Letty turned and ran, quickly. Celia rose, swaying, as if to follow. Harland was obliged to put his arm round her shoulders, or she would have fallen. She turned on him a look that seemed to break his heart. "What's happening?" she faltered. "Is this the end?"

At the same moment the London nurse appeared in the doorway. She was calm enough, but her expression was significant. "Mrs. Dittany . . ." she began.

Celia gave a wailing cry, and broke from Harland's arm. He saw her run forward, and push past the other woman. For him the world stood still. He never knew how he made the movement that brought him to the doorway. Yet somehow he reached it, in time to see what happened. The bed was opposite to him. Letty knelt by it, her head close to that of her brother. Cassilis bent above him. Michael's body was between them, almost in their arms, as if they sought to hold him back by force. But he had slipped too far. Harland beheld a last convulsive struggle, and its end. That which Cassilis and Letty gave up to Celia was the ultimate moment of her husband's life. He died as she took him. Harland thought, but was not sure,

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that he knew her. He laid his head down on her shoulder, and fell, as it seemed, into a sleep. Cassilis stood up, and turned away. His work was ended.

The scene dissolved; the world moved on again. Cassilis went to the window, and stood there, as if for the moment he could not face anyone. He moved like a man who is beaten and wearied out. Letty rose to her feet. Harland saw her fingers disengage themselves from a hand that she laid very gently down. She came past him, and went out of the door behind him. He looked straight into her eyes, but she did not see him. It was as if she were walking in a dream. He did not follow her. The nurse remained upright near him. She had her hands folded in a prim, composed manner, and appeared unconscious. She was looking with professional interest at the bed and what lay in it. The room was very still. Celia knelt with her husband's body in her arms, and did not move.

Harland went forward from his place. He came to the bed, and stood beside it. It seemed strange to him that Michael gave him no sign. The dead face was so little changed from the one he had known. He expected something . . . a greeting . . . a farewell . . . he did not know what . . . from Michael, who

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had never failed to greet him yet. But nothing came; and the dead hand that Letty had slipped from her own warm fingers lay open and empty.

"Is this my price?" thought Francis Harland. "I wasn't worth it . . . O God, I wasn't worth it!" He did not know what Power he addressed. Something had broken Michael, as you break and batter an insect with wings, capriciously; and had let Francis Harland go free. He thought, with absolute truth, "I could have died instead, willingly." And he felt his own pulses beating in his veins, and saw Michael lying still. "He died in saving me," reflected Harland; "life's a bad joke."

He knelt down by the bed. Celia had disengaged her arms from Michael's body. It lay now between the two of them, his wife and the friend who had killed him. Celia stretched out her hands across it. Harland felt them upon his own; their touch was warm and pitiful, they implored comfort. "Francis! . . ." cried Celia sobbingly. "Oh, Francis! . . ."

Harland looked again at the dead man, and saw that he was very peaceful. There was no sign of the struggle that had racked out his life. Michael's limbs had fallen into the attitude of sleep; he lay as if he smiled. He might be guarding a secret that explained

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the world, he looked so quiet. "Am I wrong?" thought Harland. "He made his choice. He knew what was best for me in the beginning. Does he still know what's best for me, now that we're at the end? Must I do without him now all my days, or shall we find a place to work together in again . . . somewhere—sometime?" The secret smile did not alter. "I don't understand," said Francis Harland. "But oh! Michael, I'll do what you want, even to this. Lead, and I'll follow you." He rose to his feet. It seemed that his life had been made quite clear to him. He saw it whole before him for a moment, as you do between sleeping and waking, when everything is possible.

Then came Celia's sobbing, and he went to comfort her. Cassilis left the room; the nurse went to the bed, and was busy there.

Outside sat Letty, her arms along the table, her face full of dreams. She looked like a child that has seen what it does not understand. Cassilis went and stood beside her. He would have spoken to her, but he could not find anything to say.

She looked up at him. Her gaze was tranquil, but very sad. She made a curious speech. "Robin, did you see how Michael looked at Celia . . . at the end?"

Cassilis could not answer.

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"Francis wouldn't look at me like that if he were dying," she said. "That's what I didn't understand."

Cassilis seized her hands. "Letty . . . Letty! . . ."

The tears were running down her cheeks. She whispered her brother's name. "He'll never speak to me again. I would have asked him to help me. He always understood. But he'll never speak to me again." She was beating herself up against the silence of death.

The door opened, and Harland and Celia came in.

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XIX

THE PLEASURES OF MEMORY

MICHAEL was buried outside the church where he had prayed as a child. Harland saw it done, in Greywall, on an afternoon when winter seemed turning to spring. The day was fair, with a blue, clean-swept sky; the sun shone into the open grave. Harland stood beside it, and thought of all Michael had done for him. There was little else in his mind these days. But he could find heart to be glad that Michael lay within hearing of the market-place, where their great fight had ended. He allowed himself to think that perhaps some day, when that fight came on again, Michael might hear echoes of it under the earth, and be glad to know his friend still valiant. He did not altogether believe it, but the thought comforted him a little, unperceived.

He went back to his own house, and occupied himself as best he could for three months. There was plenty of work to hand for him, even though he had not been elected to a seat

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in Parliament. He did a little public speaking again after a time, and some writing. But the greater part of his time was devoted to study. He guessed that he might be called upon to fight again soon, and he meant to be ready. He trained himself, and thought of Michael.

Letty he did not see very often. She had taken her brother's death hardly, in spite of, or perhaps because of, her self-control at the time. She fretted and grew very silent. In the end her father went abroad with her for six weeks. Harland was not displeased to have her gone. He had tried to comfort her, but had found it difficult. His own trouble was too great, and there was nothing that he could say. Time would, he knew, heal Letty's wounds. She was young, and she always recovered quickly. His own deep and abiding sense of bereavement was shared by but one person in the world.

That person was Celia Dittany. She had not left Greywall after her husband's death. His mother seemed to cling to her, and she herself found it difficult to leave the place where Michael had died. She went to the Underhills' house, and stayed there. Harland saw her often, and she comforted him.

Then she told him that she was going home. It was a few days before Letty's expected

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return, and they were together at the Underhills'. The month was April, and the rain was driving against the windows.

"I must go," said Celia. "It's got to be done, and it won't get any easier with waiting. I couldn't leave Michael's mother before. But she'll have Letty now, and she'll be able to do without me."

Harland said nothing. He had somehow thought that she would be always there to help him. He had forgotten Marshdikes. But Celia, it seemed, had remembered.

"It'll be spring down there," she said, as if to herself, "and the marsh 'll be full of sheep. And you'll hear the larks overhead, all day long. I've seen it so often. We never missed the spring there." Her eyes were full of memories. "I think," she said, "somehow, that Marshdikes would be lonely if I didn't go back. I've wondered if it was missing me."

She looked across at Harland, and saw his face. There was no need to ask if he remembered Marshdikes now. "Does it hurt still so much?" whispered Celia.

"It gets worse instead of better. Doesn't it for you?" His words were almost cruel, but Celia forgave them. She understood him as if he had been part of her.

"Not now," she said gently. "At first . . .

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of course. I thought I could never forgive what took him away." She did not use Michael's name. "But I've learnt to understand. Everything didn't go."

"*I* can't understand," said Harland, speaking abruptly a thought that he had always hidden. "Why should he be taken? We needed him so much . . . he'd just begun to do his best work." He stopped himself, because he felt suddenly that he had no right to hurt her like this.

There was a moment's silence; then, "He'd done the thing he cared most about," said Celia gently.

Harland cried out, "How could you forgive me for it all?"

She paused again before she answered him. "Francis dear, Michael gave you what he did gladly. Shouldn't I do the same? After all," she smiled a little in her old way, though with more sadness, "I knew you first. And there's always this to remember, that I knew I shouldn't be allowed to keep him very long. He was one of those people who are made to wear themselves out quickly. He told me so himself. We lived better, I think, because of it. You see, we knew we hadn't much time, so we wasted none of it. I've a great deal to remember and be glad of."

Harland shaded his eyes with his hand. "I

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thought once that the secret of life was to forget."

"You don't believe it now."

"I'm not sure."

"You can't," she said quickly. "If you did, you'd go away from here and drop the work Michael gave you. You'd never see me again."

Harland replied, "I have thought of doing all these things."

She spread out her hands. "And yet you don't."

"I may fail in practice. That need not alter the theory."

"Need we trouble with the theory?" she returned. "I remember Michael every day and every night. If I could forget him I wouldn't. He hurts me always, but I'm glad of it. He's hurt you too. Would you cut him out of your mind if you had the chance?"

Harland saw her inflamed with generous ardour.

"Everything's worth while," she said. "The pain we had from him, and the happiness, and the loneliness now. Who wants an easy life? We'll take things as they come, Francis, and grow from them. The other theory's cowardice. I don't believe it; and you don't believe it either."

She stood beside him and looked him full in the eyes.

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"Not when you're here," he replied. "But sometimes it's hard to stand alone."

"Don't I know?" whispered she. "Michael taught me how to laugh. But I've got to do it by myself now, and it's hard not to get tired."

Her voice broke for the moment. The hand she had laid on Harland's shoulder trembled. As once before, at Marshdikes, something betrayed him into emotion. He took her hand and kissed it. This time she did not withdraw it.

"Francis," said she, "what should I have done without you all this time?"

"If I could have given you more help . . . I owe you and Michael everything."

"Do you remember . . . such a little time ago . . . how you came to Marshdikes and were afraid of us?"

"I didn't understand. Things turn out strangely sometimes. It's all come to me as I feared. And yet I'm glad of it."

"You'll fight again?"

"I promised him that, on the night of that last big meeting of ours, after you'd left us alone."

"Did you? I never heard. Then he knew that you would go on?"

"Yes, he knew I should. And he knew that it was through him. I've been glad that I told him."

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She sat down by the wood-fire. "You'll have a good life, Francis, after all. You deserve it. You'll work and remember and help people. And Letty and you will be very happy together."

He looked up swiftly. "You think so?"

"Well, I made the match."

"It is not made yet, Celia." A touch of his old stubbornness appeared in his manner.

"What do you mean?" said Celia, after a moment's hesitation.

He replied by another question: "You think we're wise to go on with it?"

"Letty loves you."

He answered quietly, "I am not at all sure that Letty is old enough to understand the word."

"She'll learn."

"She may . . . a little too late . . . from another teacher."

"You're not fair to her. Michael wasn't either. He said . . ." She checked herself.

"What I say?" Harland's gaze found out the truth. "Michael was very wise, Celia," he said gently.

"Not over this," Celia maintained. "You're all wrong. Letty does know what she wants. She's given you everything that's in her."

"It's more than I deserve."

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"You can't leave her now."

"If she wants me I shall have to stay. Does she really want me? I think that's the important point."

"You speak as though you didn't care for her yourself. Surely, after all this time, Francis, you're a little in love with her. I know you must be."

"Celia, you know many things."

She looked at him, startled by his tone. What she read in his face seemed to frighten her. "Francis . . ." she began, and got no further.

He did not speak.

After a moment, "I don't understand you," she complained.

He was content with the reply, "I do not always understand myself."

"Surely you'll be happy with her."

"Happiness is a relative term. I shall be happier with Letty than I should have been with certain other women I have known, and less happy than I am in my present state. But that is unimportant. I am not thinking of myself. I am thinking of Letty . . . and of you."

"I don't come into it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "As you please."

Celia, rather white, said, "You're talking as

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you used to talk when I saw you again first. I thought you had changed."

Harland began, "The custom of a life-time . . ." then yielded to the same emotion that had trembled in her voice. "Celia, you know what you're doing. Letty doesn't love me now, whatever she may have done six months ago. And I don't love her . . ."

"That's not true."

"It is, and you know it is. And you know more than that." He spoke quietly enough, but Celia shrank back as if he had struck her.

"Francis, don't!"

"You understand," he said, still with the same curious quiet. "Shall I ever love any woman again but you?"

"You don't mean that," she cried.

"Why not?" She looked up, and saw that he was smiling faintly. "Is it so very strange?"

She did not answer.

"I hinted as much to you a long time ago . . . in an orchard . . . at the beginning of things."

Celia replied obstinately, "I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now."

"Yet you remember the occasion." His smile endured. The colour came into Celia's white face. Harland, abruptly serious, added, "We've learnt to know each other since then. What was I to do? You laughed, and I

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laughed with you. And then I saw your tears . . ." He came up to her. "You understand, Celia," he said, and took her in his arms.

She was passive for a moment. Her lips were warm against his own, his hand touched her hair. Then she broke free.

"Michael! . . . oh, Michael! . . ." he heard her cry sobbingly.

He remained where he was, silent, sullen almost. Celia leant against the table, controlling her sobs. He watched her unsteady hands and the pallor in her cheeks. "Celia . . ." he said, more gently.

She made a movement towards him. "Oh! why did you do it?"

"Don't you know yourself that it must always have come, sooner or later? Didn't you understand me when I began to speak? It's your revenge," he added, with an attempt at lightness. "If you remember, I promised it to you. You've got it now, Celia. Be content."

"Have you forgotten him . . . so soon?" she flung back at him.

He winced, but forgave her, and was gentle with her pain. "Is this forgetting, Celia? Would he have thought that of it? You and I can never forget. I think Michael understands."

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She would not be comforted. "No. It's not true. I won't listen. You've promised to marry Letty. I'll make you do it."

"I don't think Letty will like that," responded Harland. Tenderly enough, he was laughing.

Celia saw it, and raged. "I hate you . . . I hate you!" His quiet gaze turned her passion to tears. She laid her head down on her arms like a child.

When he saw that, he came closer, and touched her. "Are *we* going to quarrel, Celia, after all that's been?"

He could feel great shudders run through her body under his hand, but he was very patient. After a time she grew more quiet.

"Why did you talk like that to-day? You must have known what it would be for me. How could you think I should ever forgive you? I can't. You've spoilt everything."

He sighed. "I spoke too soon. But I'll say no more. Go back to Marshdikes and hate me for a little. I'll come to you again later on."

She stood up. "I'll go to-morrow, and leave you to think things over. When you get Letty back again you'll find your bearings. You've seen too much of me lately. As soon as I'm gone you'll forget. A great deal depends on your marrying Letty. She can help

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you so much in your career. And everyone expects it. You'll see that yourself very soon. Marry her, Francis, and be happy. And come and see me sometimes. We've gone through too much together to give each other quite up."

"Is that all you can say to me, Celia?"

She answered, "My heart's too full of him for anything more."

He did not speak, but he laid both hands on her shoulders in a way that she remembered. He looked at her very steadily. It was in her eyes that the tears came.

"Are you going to break my heart, Celia?" he said.

She tried to look at him bravely. But some fear, whether of him or of herself, beat down her regard. She began to tremble.

"Celia . . ." he said again.

She cried out, "Francis, let me go. Not to-day, oh! not to-day."

He loosed her at once. She stood where she was, as if he still held her.

"Go now," he said. "I'll not keep you. It was too soon. Wait for me at Marshdikes, and I'll come when I'm free."

"You'll marry Letty," she insisted.

He answered nothing.

She went next day. He saw her off at the station, and waited by her empty carriage until

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the train started. It was inevitable that at such a moment she should think of all that had happened since she came to Greywall. She spoke of that to him. "It seems so long since that other journey. But I shall remember it all the way, till I get home." There were unshed tears in her voice.

For a moment Harland gave way. "Let me come with you. I can't bear to think of you going through it all alone. That house . . ."

Celia winced, as he did. But she was stronger than he. "Francis, I must . . . you can't help me there. I know you would if you could, but this thing has got to be done alone. I owe it to Michael."

His weakness had passed, he did not make any more entreaties.

"And you've things to do here," she added, forcing a smile. "You've got to meet Letty, you know."

He smiled himself at that, half sadly. There was a movement in the crowd, and an increase of noise. "You're just starting," said Harland.

Celia gave him her ungloved hand. "Good-bye. Don't come to Marshdikes. I don't want you there." She was apparently careless.

He was grave. "I shall come," he said.

The train jerked forward. Realisation of

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their parting came into Celia's eyes, as Harland watched them. He heard her pronounce his name. Then her hand left his, and he saw no more of her. It came to him abruptly that he had said nothing to her of all the things that were in his mind. The train went out of the station. He was left with a sense of failure that astonished him. It was as if something had told him that he would never see her again.

"And Letty comes to-morrow," he found his reflection to be. The words appeared significant. As he went away he tried to get them out of his head, and failed.

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XX

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

In the town Harland was almost run down by young Cassilis, who was out in the car on his rounds. He made reparation by giving Harland a lift towards home. On the way they talked politics.

"It looks to me," pronounced Cassilis, "as if you might be fighting again this spring."

"I've been trying to prepare myself for that. Everything points to a general election. The question is . . . how soon."

"It'll probably come suddenly when it does come." Cassilis took a sharp turning. "You ought to do better this time," he said.

"You think so?"

"Without compliment, I do. The last time was close enough, and you've worked well since."

"I've had nothing else to fill up my time." Harland's tone was unguardedly weary.

Cassilis preserved silence for half a mile. It was Harland who spoke first. "You'll help me again, I hope. You were extremely

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valuable to us in the winter." He spoke with great sincerity.

Cassilis set the car at a little incline. When this was surmounted, "I'm not sure that I can," he said, with more hesitation than seemed natural. "I had a certain amount of time to spare in the winter. I'm busier now." He did not look round at Harland.

Harland, as has been indicated, was more sensitive to distinctions of manner than most men. He felt a certain hostility on the part of Cassilis. For the moment he was ignorant of its cause, and too wise to ask it. He returned instead, "That will be a great loss to me."

The young doctor appeared remorseful, though not repentant. "I hope you'll get in. I think you're sure to. Skinner's calmed down a lot, you know. He won't run a candidate of his own this time, whatever he does in a year or two." They talked strategy until they came to Harland's lodge-gate, where Cassilis set him down.

As he walked up through the park, "On Letty's account, I suppose," reflected Harland, thinking of the doctor's refusal to work for him any longer. "It's an ironical situation. I wonder how it will all finish, and where we shall be in ten years. . . ."

Next morning Letty and her father came

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home. Harland went that afternoon to see them. Colonel Underhill was cheerful, and looked the better for his journey. Letty did not. She seemed tired and out of spirits. Her black dress robbed her of all her colour. She greeted Harland nervously, and would not meet his eyes.

After tea, he went up with her to that little sitting-room of hers where she spent so much of her time. They sat by the fire together, and talked a little, but not easily. Letty was shy and silent. Harland sat thinking of ways to begin telling her what had come to him, but found none. The explanation seemed impossible. And he had not kissed her yet, after all the time that she had been away from him. He wondered if she had noticed that. . . .

"It's funny to be back again," said Letty, as if to herself. "This room hasn't altered a bit, and yet it seems ages since I was here."

"You'll soon settle down again," said Harland; and thought the remark extraordinarily fatuous, even while he made it.

"I wonder if I shall?" said Letty, with one of her quick glances round, that gave the effect of something imprisoned. "It's easy to get into a groove again, of course. But I think I've rather grown out of being at

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home." And as she said it a bright colour stained her cheeks, and she avoided Harland's look.

He thought, "Of course . . . She thinks she's going to marry me almost at once." He swallowed down something in his throat, and did not speak.

Letty got up from her chair, and knelt down by the fire. It had burnt rather low. She began choosing little bits of coal out of the scuttle, and dropping them into the grate. It had always been one of her tricks to love playing with a red fire. Harland looked down on her bent head, with its curly brown hair, and on the white nape of her neck above the black collar of her gown. He thought, "Why have I never been in love with her? She's sweet and faithful and pathetic, and I've never done anything but hurt her. I can't help it. We don't belong together." And he thought of Celia.

"Francis . . ." Letty began.

She had done with the fire, and was sitting down there, one foot twisted under her, supporting herself on her hand. She did not turn her head, but sat looking into the coals, and the red light from them was reflected in her eyes. Harland sat sideways to her, and watched her face. "What is it, Letty?" he said, praying himself for courage.

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"I want to say something to you. Only it's difficult, and I'm afraid."

"I believe I'm in the same plight," returned Harland, and could not forbear a twisted smile. He wondered what Letty had to say to him, and how she would take what he had for her in his turn. She was always preparing solemnities for him. But he had no words to be serious with her, now that he had come to that at last. . . .

"It's about our engagement," said Letty.

His heart had begun to beat sickeningly fast. He did not speak. "Do you think it's any use going on with it?" asked Letty.

She turned and looked at him. He managed to meet her eyes, but he could not understand them. "I think we'd better let go," Letty said.

And now he thought that she had seen his mind, and was trying to help him. "You can't mean that?" he heard a voice—surely not his own—reply to her.

She smiled, in a fashion he did not know. "Are you so sorry, my dear?" she asked him. She had never called him just that before; nor used that tone to him, gentle as it was, and pitying, and full of laughter that was in itself a good-bye. "Didn't you mean this too?" she said. "I thought you were trying to tell me yourself. You know we can't go on."

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Harland understood that the end had come as he wished. He leant his head on his hand. "Oh, Letty, what a mess I've made of things!" said he remorsefully.

"Why, it wasn't your fault," she said. "It was mine."

He cried out, "Don't think that. Don't blame yourself. I couldn't bear it."

She smiled faintly, and shook her head. "I hurt you all the time, and quarrelled with you, and wouldn't help you. You were awfully good to me. Don't remember all the times when I was ungrateful."

He replied, quite truthfully, "I have forgotten them already."

He looked at her, and remembered instead a time when she had thought well of him.

"You'll understand me when I say that I wish we could have managed it," was wrung from him.

"I think I shall always understand you now," Letty said.

Harland knew she was right. But it was all too late. As she knelt beside him, and he looked at her: "Why couldn't we find each other in time?" broke from him.

"I suppose it's just . . . the way things happen," said Letty.

He had nothing to add to that.

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She looked up at him with her clear, candid glance, as of a child making confession of a fault. "I knew all along," she said, "that we weren't being wise. But I wouldn't admit it, because . . . I was very fond of you, Francis."

And again Harland heard a voice that he scarcely comprehended as his own say, "You won't change that, Letty?"

The girl replied quietly, "I don't think I can, you know."

"You don't want to?"

"No; I thought I did. I was going to be very angry with you." She smiled a little, almost unwillingly. "But you've shown me that I don't need to do that. I'll be very nice to you in future, Francis, and quite different."

It was curious how much pain the thought gave him. Everything was to be quite different in the future, and much better. There was no need to regret the past. Harland was surprised at the disturbance of his own feelings.

Letty stood up. There was a look in her face that he did not know. He had not thought her so old.

"You remember," she said, "the night Michael died. We were both there at the end. I saw him look at Celia just as he went. You could never have felt about me as he did then. And that's the only thing worth having.

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It's not right to marry without it. I know that now. We should be wrong if we didn't let each other go." She slipped her hand from his shoulder down his arm in a lingering movement of farewell.

"It's not that I didn't try my hardest," Harland groaned.

She smiled, pressing his arm. "As if it came by trying! Oh, Francis, I know; I've watched you. You kept your word always, and wouldn't show that it was hard. But everything's changed now. I'm growing up, though you always said I shouldn't; and you've found someone to take seriously."

He started.

"Don't hide from me, after all that's happened," she begged him whimsically. "See, I'm quite open with you. Robin"—the warm colour rose in her cheeks—"loves me more than anyone else in the world. So he deserves to have me. He's waited all this time, while I went about looking for adventures, and never thought about him. But now all my adventures have come to nothing, and I'm back where I started. And I find it's Robin I want after all. Not you or anybody else, who're so independent that you don't need me; but Robin, because I can help him, and look after him, and that's all that's worth doing in this world."

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Harland could not answer, because of all that her words had made him understand about her for the first time.

"And you," she said, "are going to teach Celia how to forget."

"No," he replied, "she is going to teach me how to remember."

He watched the familiar wrinkle of perplexity between her brows. It made his heart very sore and very gentle. He did not know whether Letty inclined him more to laughter or to tears.

"It's been a strange year," he said.

"You used to hurt me so much, at the beginning." She saw the pain and the regret in his face.

"If I'd only understood . . . You've forgiven me. I wonder if I shall ever forgive myself."

"Some day," said Letty. She smiled at him gravely.

He said, "I've been a fool all my life. But I've paid too, in ways that you wouldn't understand. When I was trying to stand out against Michael and Celia . . . when he showed me my work, and I wouldn't do it . . . when I heard that he was going to die . . ." His words came to an end.

"Francis . . ." Letty whispered.

"You're very like him," Harland replied

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after a little. "Sometimes I think you understand."

"I'm very silly always," said Letty. "But I did guess just a little how fond you were of him, and how much you love her. And she'll turn to you now, when she's finished with her trouble; and you'll be happy together, and remember him. Things are going to come right in the end. Only . . . we've had to go through a good deal before we found out our way."

Harland looked at her as at one who goes away on a long journey. There were tears on her lashes, but her lips smiled. He had not known how hard it would be to say farewell to her.

"Good-bye, Francis-that-was," said Letty.

He could not trust himself to touch her. "I wish you the best of luck, always and always, my dear. I haven't deserved you. If I had done . . ."

She stopped him, her fingers on his lips. "Don't worry yourself. It's something to find out our mistakes in time. And I think I've found a friend."

He protested that very eagerly.

"You know," said Letty, with a sudden, elvish, adorable laugh, "you would have made a very uncomfortable husband." She put her arms round his neck, and kissed him before he

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knew what she would be at. He held her close for a moment, in farewell to what might have been, then let her go. She stood a little way from him. "I'm glad you felt like that at the end. To-morrow we'll be sober. . . . Are you going to Celia soon? I think she'll want you."

"At once," he replied. "I don't want to leave her too long alone."

"Give her my love," Letty said.

There was a moment's pause.

"Francis," said Letty, under her breath, "there are tears in your eyes."

"Because you're grown up," he answered. "And it's my fault."

She shook her head. "I was bound to do it. You'd have stopped me if you could. Robin takes me as I am. We shall all be happy. Only . . . good-bye's a horrid word, and I don't like using it. Francis, let me go; I can't say any more."

She ran from him out of the room. He did not stop her going. As she had said, there were tears in his eyes, though he did not know why this was, since he had been given his heart's desire.

And then he went home to set his house in order, and go to Celia.

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XXI

THE SURGERY

THE night brought one of those unexpected crises which make history. There was a scene at Westminster: a great speech, and a challenge, and finally its acceptance. Next morning Colonel Underhill looked up from his paper to remark, "You'll be helping Francis canvass again in a few days, Letty."

"Why?"

"General Election."

Letty laughed, not mirthfully, but with a strange excitement. "I got out just in time, then?"

Her parents looked at her.

"We've broken off our engagement," she said.

Colonel Underhill was surprised, his wife was not. She had been expecting the news for some time. Most women specialise in this kind of discernment.

That afternoon Letty went into Greywall on foot. There was a street of old houses under the Castle—Hungate Ditch it was called. It had once been the good part of the town, but

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it was deserted now, and surrounded by a poor quarter. The old houses were let out, floor by floor, to anyone who would take them as offices. Robin Cassilis did not live there, but he had a couple of rooms at No. 9, and used them as a surgery. Letty knew that she would find him seeing patients there after four o'clock.

She went down Hungate Ditch. It was narrow and paved with cobble-stones; and grass grew between them, because few people came that way. The houses on each side were very tall; they were built out of a dark kind of brick, and had projecting lintels and door-frames. The street ran north and south, so that at this time of day it was brimmed up with shadow like a river-bed. Only the top-most windows on the eastern side caught the light, and burned as if they were on fire. The castle rock went up sheer behind them, with the castle on its summit.

Letty came to the door of the house she knew, and hesitated there. The street was very quiet now that her own footsteps had ceased. She looked up at the sunshine on the roofs above, and at the castle high over-head. Everything seemed strange to her to-day, as if she had come into a town she did not know. As she waited she heard the clocks of the city striking four. She had

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heard them all her life, yet to-day they seemed unfamiliar, even as time was an unfamiliar thing. She listened until the echoes died away.

Almost immediately she had rung the door-bell she heard steps in the house. It occurred to her then that very possibly Cassilis might open the door to her himself. Oddly enough, this thought came near to driving her away. She did in the end stand her ground, but she became very pale; and when the door opened she drew a quick breath.

In the entry was an old woman, Cassilis' servant. She knew Letty Underhill, and greeted her kindly. "So you're home again, miss? Well, it's a long time since we've seen you—a long time indeed."

"Is Doctor Cassilis here?" asked Letty, rather unsteadily.

He was not, but he was expected. There were patients waiting for him already. Would Miss Underhill come in, or should the doctor be given a message? Letty said that she would wait.

The old servant took her down a passage, and through the hall, with its blackened panelling and its four-square oaken staircase. A couple of poor women, one with a bandaged head, sat there waiting on a bench. The light that came in from the tall window half-

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way up the stairs showed the place dirty and much neglected. The names of the men who occupied the rooms above were painted on the wall. A door to the right stood open on the surgery itself. Letty saw the evidences of Robin's trade as she went by.

The servant took her into the little room behind where Cassilis kept his books. "The doctor won't be long, miss. He's late already. He had a big round to do, miss. If you're sure you wouldn't rather leave a message with me . . ."

Letty said that what she had to tell Doctor Cassilis could not easily be explained in a message. The old woman left her.

Letty stood in the middle of the room. It was familiar to her because she had been there once or twice on charitable business. Robin's books were in it, and certain stores and instruments that the front room could not hold. The place was very small and dark, since its one window looked out on to the rock behind; and it was not attractive. Robin Cassilis was an orderly man, but he had no time to think of comfort. Letty stood by a table covered with dusty books and papers. There was an old, torn glove that Cassilis had left lying among them. Suddenly the tears came to the girl's eyes. She lifted the glove, and put it to her lips . . .

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A long time passed. The servant had latched the door imperfectly as she went out, and it had swung open a little way. Letty heard what went on in the hall outside. Once or twice footsteps descended the stairs, and someone left the house. The women who sat in the hall exchanged an occasional remark, and the housekeeper came out of the surgery and talked to them. "Doctor's late," said one, and a little after, "Late, ain't he?" came in response. It became rather dark in the room where Letty waited. She guessed that she had been there about half an hour, and she thought, "Can anything have happened to him?" . . . The house door opened and shut, and there followed the voice she knew. Until that moment she had not understood how much her fear had grown upon her. She sank into the chair by the table. She could not have stood upright any longer.

Cassilis, in the hall, said, "I'm late, I know. I was kept over at Stone. Let me see that head at once, Mrs. Fox. I'm very sorry you had to wait so long. Come into the surgery."

One of the women began, "She's been real bad with it, sir," and the other, "Oh, sir, it's good of you . . ."

Cassilis repeated, "Come into the surgery. I'll dress it for you at once."

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Then the housekeeper interrupted: "Miss Underhill is waiting to see you, sir."

Letty sat very still behind her door.

"Where is she?" asked Cassilis.

Letty heard the change in his voice perfectly plainly.

"In your little room, sir."

There was silence for a moment. Letty did not move.

"Ask her," said Cassilis, "if she'll be so good as to wait ten minutes longer. Say I've a patient to see first."

The surgery door closed upon him and the two women. The housekeeper came with her message.

"It's all right," said Letty. "I'm not in any hurry." She was left alone again. She sat by herself near the table.

The voices in the next room were audible to her through the panelling. She was quite quiet and, as it seemed, without impatience. After a little she put out her hand to the glove that lay on the table, and drew it towards her. It lay under her fingers as if it were something that she wished to protect.

In time she heard the women go. She sat still. Cassilis came along the hall and into the room where she was. He had a basin of some disinfectant liquid in his hand, and wore the linen coat in which he had worked. "I'm

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sorry you were kept waiting, Letty," he said.

She watched him. He set down his burden carefully, then came to her. The room was not too dark for her to see the expression of his face. It seemed to her cold, almost impassive. There was no welcome in it. She thought suddenly, "I was wrong to come. He doesn't want me after all."

"So you're back again," said Cassilis, as his servant had done. His voice was perfectly calm; he might have been speaking to a chance acquaintance.

"We came the day before yesterday," said Letty. "I didn't let you know beforehand. I thought you'd find out."

"Yes. Harland told me you were expected."

There was a long pause. The girl felt that never, in all her life, would she be able to say what she had come for.

"Can I do anything for you?" said Cassilis then.

His voice at least had not changed. It was quiet and kind, as it had always been, and very gentle. Letty summoned all her courage.

"I wanted to tell you something."

"Yes?"

For what seemed an age she could not find words.

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"I'm not going to marry Francis after all." This was what she, or someone, had said a lifetime ago. . . . Cassilis had not made any answer. "I wanted to tell you myself," she managed to add. Her lips refused more. There was a silence that must needs endure for ever.

"Do you understand what you're saying?" broke from Cassilis.

She began to laugh, tremulously. "I'm not sure. Do you? Or must I put it more plainly?"

"Letty . . ." said Cassilis.

All came right with the world.

"I thought you'd never see what I meant," said Letty. "You wanted it very plain, didn't you?"

"Well, it was rather a serious matter for me."

"I'm sure it was. Are you repenting already?" Conventional reassurances followed. "If you'd known what I'd come for, would you have kept me waiting those last ten minutes?"

"I'm . . . not sure. Were you angry?"

"Shall I pretend I was? When I heard you say you didn't want to be bothered with me . . . wouldn't it have served you right if I'd gone away and never come back again?" She put her arms round him. "Robin,

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no . . . I loved you all the more. If you'd come to me then, I should have been disappointed. I sat here listening to you through the doors. And I thought . . . Robin, will you understand? . . . I played we were married already, and I was waiting till you'd finished your work and could come home with me."

It seemed he understood.

"*Didn't* you guess what I'd come for?" whispered she.

"I wasn't sure. I couldn't let myself hope for this."

"Oh, poor Robin!"

"I did that bit of work awfully badly, you know, thinking of you in here all the time."

"I'm afraid I'm glad."

A contented silence followed.

"Letty, why didn't you let me know before this? I've had a bad time since you went away."

"I wasn't any better off, wandering round from place to place in Italy, and looking out for letters. You never wrote to me."

"Letty, I didn't dare. You'd made things very hard for me all along."

"I know I did. But I was so unhappy, and you wouldn't understand what was the matter with me."

"How could I?"

"Didn't you ever guess?"

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"I'm not sure. When your brother was ill I began to think I'd made one or two bad mistakes. But it seemed impossible. Harland was so much more what you wanted."

"Francis?" Her laugh put all his fears away. "Robin, you might have found out at the very beginning of the election, if you'd been wise."

"When?"

She answered him: "Do you remember when you stopped my car, and took me into a cottage where a child was hurt?"

"Letty, do you think I'm likely to have forgotten?"

They were both serious now. "You found out something about me that day that Francis never knew. I've remembered it all the time since. I thought of it yesterday when I said good-bye to him."

"How could he let you go?"

"It couldn't be helped. He never really belonged to me, and I never really belonged to him. I've found out how to be friends with him now, but that's all. You won't be jealous of him, will you, Robin?" Her clear eyes met his. "There won't be any need."

Cassilis put away his last feeling against his rival. "It's all right, Letty." Her smile was a reward for such generosity as he needed. "I told him yesterday that I was too busy to

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canvass for him this time. I suppose I shall be doing it after all, though."

Letty laughed. "We'll do it together. This time we must get him in."

"I shall enjoy this time better than I did the last."

Letty glanced up at his face. What she saw there made her cry out, "Oh, Robin, was it so bad? How could I treat you like that?"

"Letty, I've forgiven you."

"Don't forgive me too easily. I want to remember for a little, and make it up to you."

He told her what, indeed, he thought: "You did that by coming here to-day. I shall be grateful for it all my life."

"It wasn't easy. But you deserved it. I felt I couldn't send for you, after all I'd done to you. So I came and waited . . . for penance."

"Letty, don't." He kissed her into silence. . . .

There came the moment when she must leave him. It was late, and she had three miles to go, whilst his work claimed him. They parted lingeringly.

"I never knew you had the most beautiful room in Greywall for your office."

"Nor did I—till to-day. . . . When can I see you again?"

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"Any time, as soon as you can. It'll seem a long time off, whenever it is. . . . I must go home and tell them."

"What will they think?"

"They'll be happy so long as I am. I never knew that before, but now I see it. They didn't want me to marry Francis. They were glad yesterday when they heard I'd broken with him. I believe I never loved them so much as I shall now—you've taught me how." She put up her face to his. "Robin, I've so much to learn."

"You're perfect already."

"I'm not, but I like you to think so."

"Let me come back with you."

"Not to-night. You've things to do, and I've interrupted your work so often. Let me be different now, and help you."

"No one could help me better."

They went soberly out of the little room. It was almost dark there and quite dark in the hall outside, where the staircase was all shadows. Letty felt for her man's arm, and the two made their way out together. Their footsteps sounded loud in the empty house. They came to the door. Robin opened it. The street outside was very quiet. The sun had just set, and the sky behind the opposite roofs was clear green and yellow. The mass of the gable stood clear against it. There

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was no one to be seen in Hungate Ditch from end to end, and nothing to be heard but the sound of the city far off. Letty and Robin stepped out, and shut the door behind them.

"I heard the door . . . like that . . . when you came in," said Letty, with a curious little laugh. "I'd been waiting for half an hour, listening for you to come. Doesn't that seem funny . . . now?"

"And I never knew what I was coming back to. How I should have hurried!"

The listening walls about them heard them laugh, very contentedly. They went away together.

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XXII

"AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING"

And Harland, when he heard of the coming fight, said, "To-morrow . . . I've one thing of my own to settle before I begin."

His committee were obliged to make their first day's arrangements in his absence.

He travelled to Celia through the spring country. The April weather smiled upon his journey. The sky was blue and white with drifting clouds, all the hedges were green. London, when he came to it, was beautiful. He stayed a night in his own dark little house by the Abbey. When he slept there last he had been engaged to Letty. He did not think of it now. Instead, he remembered a telephone conversation with Celia, and a journey to Marshdikes that had followed it. He had not travelled that way since.

He went out after eleven, and walked by the river. The night was clear, but without a moon. The star-strewn velvet of the sky arched overhead; in the shadow of the bridge the water ran, paved with a multitude of stars.

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There was no wind, and the lamps on the bridge burnt quietly. The empty road between them shone as if it were wet with rain. Harland lingered until the clocks all round him struck the hour. His thoughts were many, but Michael was in all of them.

Next day he went down to Marshdikes. He had not written to Celia of his coming, and she did not meet him. He walked the Rye road from Appledore between two and three in the afternoon. At his last coming the willow trees had dropped their golden leaves for him all the way, and the marshes had worn autumn colours. To-day he had an arch of green overhead, and the blue sky shone through it. The road under his feet was white; the marshes were green and full of sheep. The distant hills were very clear; the wind blew, and all the windmills up there turned merrily. And the larks were singing overhead. Harland had not understood that the marsh could be so beautiful. He walked quietly, thinking of his journey's end. Marshdikes had not changed when he came to it. The farm buildings lay soberly under the hill; the two poplars trembled in the wind above them. Rye was clear in the distance, with the sea beyond it. The apple trees in the orchard by the house were white with blossom. The sheep struggled up and down the grassy cliff

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beyond. In the valley all the streams caught the light.

Harland laid his hand on the latch of the gate that Michael had once opened to him. The garden within was full of wallflowers, brown and yellow; their scent came out to Harland like a welcome. The shadow of the mulberry tree lay on the grass. There was no sign of any life near. Marshdikes slept enchanted. Harland stood waiting for a sign that he might enter and take his reward. The door of the house was open. Someone came to it and looked at him. It was Celia. She did not speak or move after she saw him. He opened the gate and went up the path to her.

"So you've come," she said.

He replied, "You knew I should come?"

She answered, "Yes." Not until then did she give both her hands into his.

They went and sat down under the mulberry tree. He had not kissed her, nor spoken of his love to her. Everything seemed understood between them. They talked quietly together, almost like people in a dream.

"Letty told me as soon as she came back that she didn't mean to marry me. It seems she made up her mind while she was away. She's found out that she wanted Cassilis all along."

"I wonder I never saw that."

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"I'd suspected it. I was always afraid that I shouldn't keep her."

"Didn't you find it hard to let her go?"

"Curiously enough, I did. She was very sweet, and very self-reproachful. I believe in the end I came nearer loving her than ever before. Well, she's gone, and Cassilis will get what he's waited for. I think he deserves it. I hope he'll make her happy."

"Who wouldn't try to do that?"

"No one—not even my cold-blooded self. My poor little Letty . . . Well, she's grown up now, she tells me. I mustn't patronise her any longer."

Celia's laugh sounded in the hidden garden.

"And now?" she said, after a pause.

"I've got more work to do. You've seen about the election, of course?"

"Yes. You'll win it this time."

"I think so."

Her words had not been a question; his answer expressed no doubt.

"I've still got Michael to help me," he said.

"You believe that now?" she asked him, but not as if she feared his reply.

He answered, "Yes."

Long, sweet silence fell about them. It seemed that the whole world had come to an end, and would never move any farther. This

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garden afternoon and these flowers were for all time; they could not change.

"So Marshdikes gets the last laugh," said Harland to himself.

"I wonder."

Celia twisted a leaf from the mulberry tree in her fingers reflectively.

"Six months ago," said Harland, "I came here and knew nothing. I've been learning since."

"And yet," replied Celia, "everything Marshdikes gave has been taken back again."

"I suppose so. The hope that I should succeed in my election . . . Letty's promise to marry me . . . Michael's friendship . . . all gone. If I chose to escape now, I should be justified." He paused.

Celia did not speak.

"And yet I can't," he said. "Marshdikes has got hold of me, body and soul. I shall never be independent again. I shall have to work for Marshdikes all my life, whether I'm paid or not."

"D'you want payment?"

"I hope I shall work no less if I'm denied it."

He watched the sky through the tracery of branches above his head. Celia listened to the wind. There was no other sound in the garden except the sound of the bees. The

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shadows were beginning to lengthen, the sunshine was golden.

"You've worked for your reward," Celia said.

"Have I? I feel no man deserves it less."

"I'm not sure that . . . Michael would have agreed with you." She just paused before the name.

"I never knew what he thought of my work."

"He thought a great deal of it."

"In spite of all I did against him? Well, let that be my final justification. I shall never get a better."

A scarlet and black butterfly drifted into the shadow of the tree, and came to rest on Celia's hand. She sat quiet until it rose and fluttered back to the sunshine. Then:

"You're not angry with us, Francis?" she asked the man at her feet.

"What do you mean exactly, Celia?"

"I thought just now you sounded a little bitter. When you said that you'd been made to work without wages. You have worked hard, you know. You pretend to deny it, but I've seen. You mustn't think I undervalue these three months."

"That would be difficult. Their value is so infinitesimal." He would not look at her.

"You're not fair to yourself," said she.

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"What have I done?" She could not see his face, but his voice had changed in the very act of speaking. "You had it all classified a moment ago. Failed in the only honest piece of work I ever tried to do . . . tired out a girl who used to love me . . . and killed my best friend. It's a good record."

"You describe it badly," she replied. "You'll look at it differently in three months' time."

"Shall I have gone back to my old, wretched ways? Shall I have learnt to despise myself for the whole wretched adventure? Shall I laugh at it? You and I used to laugh once." He laughed as it was, but not pleasantly.

Celia cried, "Oh, Francis, what have we done to you? It wasn't right; we ought to have left you alone. We meant to make you happy, and we've ruined your life. You were better off before."

He answered, "Yes, I was better off before. I had no feelings, and no troubles. If I'd gone away from here that first time, and never come back . . . if I'd refused Michael's invitation at the beginning . . ." He stopped short.

"Go now," said Celia, quickly and suddenly. "We've done you nothing but harm. You'll never forget us, and you'll never be contented again. Go now, before it's too late."

They looked at each other for a long moment.

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"Do you mean that?" said Harland.

She answered steadily, "Yes."

He got up. She thought he was going to obey her. She lay back in her chair, unable to move. He came to her, and put both hands on her shoulders. There was a faint smile about his lips.

"Unfortunately, Celia," he said, "it is too late already. As you say, I should never be contented again. And I should certainly never forget."

The power of resistance had left her. She remained quiet under his hands.

"I can't get away from you," he said. "And I don't want to. You've taught me a new way of living . . . you and Michael between you. I'm not afraid of work or sorrow. I only want to pay you two back for saving me."

Abruptly speech returned, and her tenderness for him. "Oh, Francis, thank God we didn't fail."

"It was worth doing, then? In spite . . . of the price?"

She faced him unshrinkingly. "It *was* worth while."

There was a long silence under the mulberry tree.

"You'll finish Michael's work, then?" said Harland at last. Yet no other word had been spoken between them.

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"Don't ask me yet, Francis. Give me a little more time. You've your fight to go through in Greywall, and I've things to remember here. It's too soon."

He answered gently, "But when I've taken Greywall and you've said good-bye to Marshdikes . . ." He left the question incomplete.

She made no answer, but her hands came up to his.

"You're sure?" he said, like all lovers.

She answered, "You know I can't help it. It all began too long ago. Everything in me now is yours."

Then he kissed her. . . .

They sat in the shade of the tree for an hour, talking of the past and the future. Between whiles they drifted into a golden silence, deeper than words. Life seemed for the moment perfectly plain, lucid, and without sorrow. There were no unanswered questions in it.

"Did Michael know all along what he meant to do with me?"

"I think he did. He said to me once that he understood you absolutely because you were so like him."

"Do you remember how you made Reformer break my arm for me? Have you kept her all this time?"

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"You'd find her in the stable now if you went up. It's true, isn't it, that we've given you nothing but pain from the beginning?"

"Most true. I shall never get *my* revenge."

"You've had some of it. Six years ago . . . . and when you gave me so much trouble at the beginning of the election. I think our accounts balance fairly well now."

"Is that true, Celia?"

"As true as most of the things you say to me. . . . Oh, I'm unkind to you, Francis. Forgive me. We shall quarrel all our days."

"I don't mind. It's worth it. You've taught me how to take my risks. I'm going to try and finish the adventure properly. I've lost a great deal of time; but I swear I'll make it up. And at the end . . ."

"At the end . . ." repeated she. They looked forward across many happy years to a death that had no terrors, even as Michael's had had none.

"Life's sweet, after all," said Harland. "Though I never knew it till I met you."

"I didn't teach you, Francis."

"No; but you'll keep me from forgetting." Over the thought of Michael their hearts came together.

At sunset he left her. They stood by the gate, and the scent of the wallflowers was all about them. The house was dark against a

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coloured sky, the leaves of the poplar trembled a little. Every other tree was still.

"Come back to me soon," murmured Celia.

"My heart stops with you. I can't live away from you. Wait for me, Celia; I shall come back again." He left her there, and set out. The dust beneath his feet made his going inaudible. He walked back under the trees the way he had come, his face to the east. The sky there was of a deep blue, quiet and fathomless; one star came out and looked at him.

Through the night he journeyed back to Greywall. He did not sleep, though his journey was long. His thoughts were busy with all he had done, and all he hoped to do. He sat upright; his face wore the look of one who goes to battle. He was eager, a little excited, but perfectly calm; at times he smiled.

He came to Greywall at dawn. The river, as he saw it from the train crossing the bridge, was pale and shining like a sword. The town lay quiet, the castle was blue against a sky heavy with rain. The day had scarcely come as yet. He got out of the train, and the air was very cold. He breathed it with difficulty, as one may in a dream.

No one had expected him to arrive at that hour, and he was glad of it. He made his way past a yawning official, and out of the

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station. He intended to walk through the town, and as far as his own house. By the time that he reached it his servants would be up to let him in. And after breakfast he must telephone to Quatermaine. The day would be a busy one.

Francis Harland walked through the city. The streets were grey and shining after a night of rain; the wind blew down them piercingly from the east. There were few sounds as yet, and his own footsteps echoed back to him from the walls. He stared up at the castle. There was a pale light behind it; it had, as always, the appearance of desertion, because you could look through it to the windows on the other side. It crouched upon its rock; the town huddled beneath for shelter.

In the market-place everything was quiet. The stones were empty, the houses shuttered and blind. The Town Hall clock pointed to half-past four. Harland went beneath it, and past the door of the Castle Inn. The curtains were drawn across the window that he knew.

East of the market-place is the street called Fletcher's Gate. He went down it. At the end of it St. Luke's Church rises black and delicate, the roofs of it overhead branched like tree-tops, the pillars below like the trunks of trees. The graveyard round it is banked up above the level of the pavement three or four

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feet, and the dead lie so close to the living passers-by that an outstretched hand will touch their graves. There is no wall to keep intruders out, only the slope of the bank, and the long grass above it.

Harland came so far, and halted. The grass over Michael's grave was level with his face as he stood in the street below. Everything was quiet about the church, but from the town behind came the first noises of life. A cart went by, and there was the sound of footsteps. The sky overhead was clear and cool; dew lay on the blades of grass, and wetted Harland's fingers that moved among them. He bent his head as to a sleeper, and bade his friend good-morrow.

"Are you awake, Michael?" he said. "Listen now, and you'll hear us fighting . . ."

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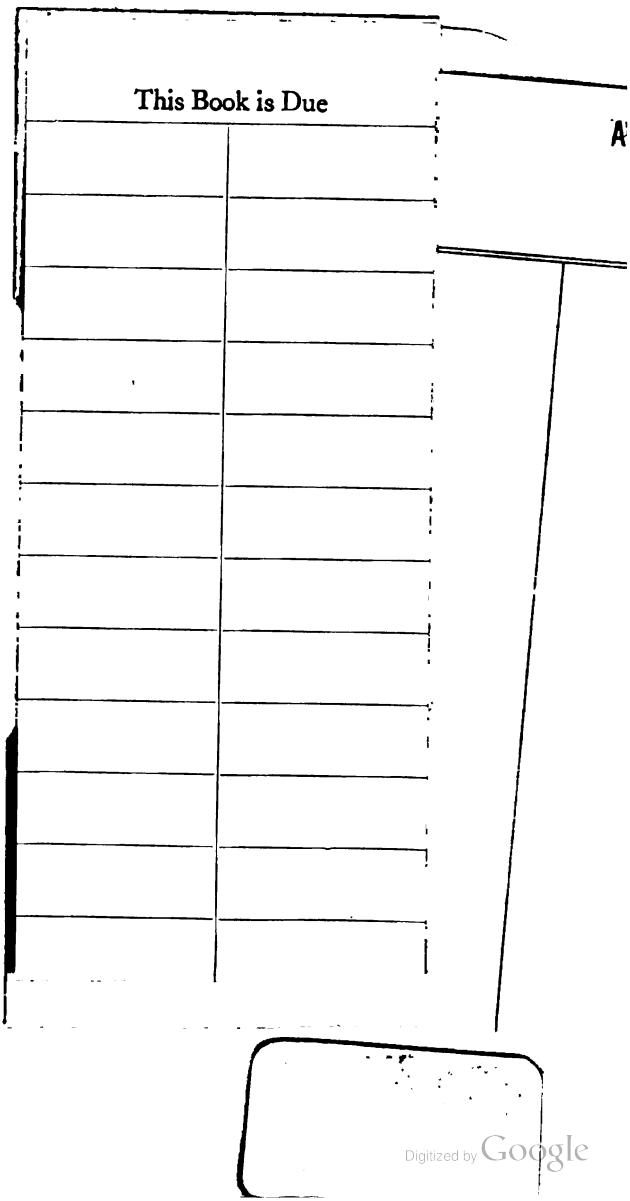

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